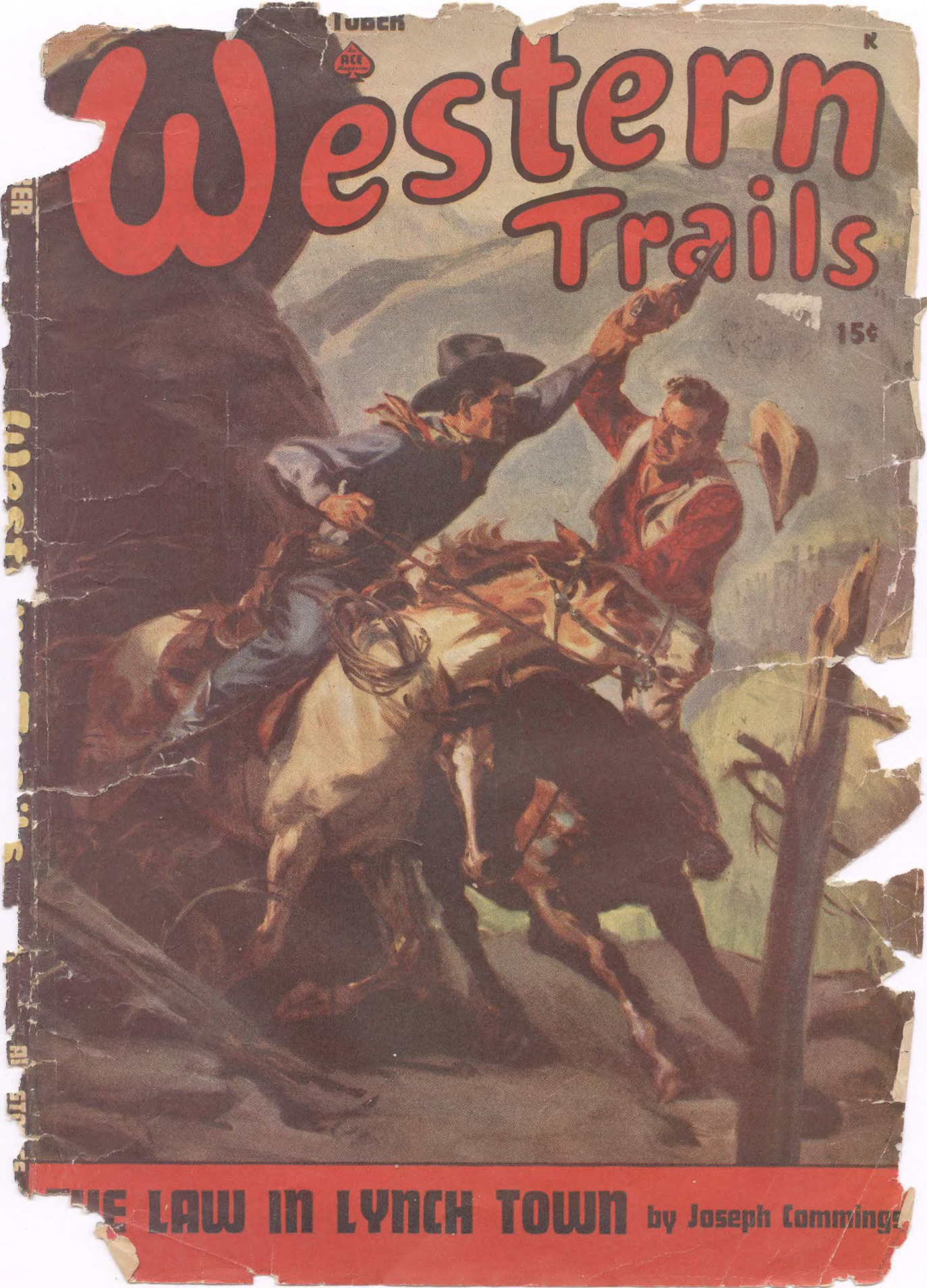
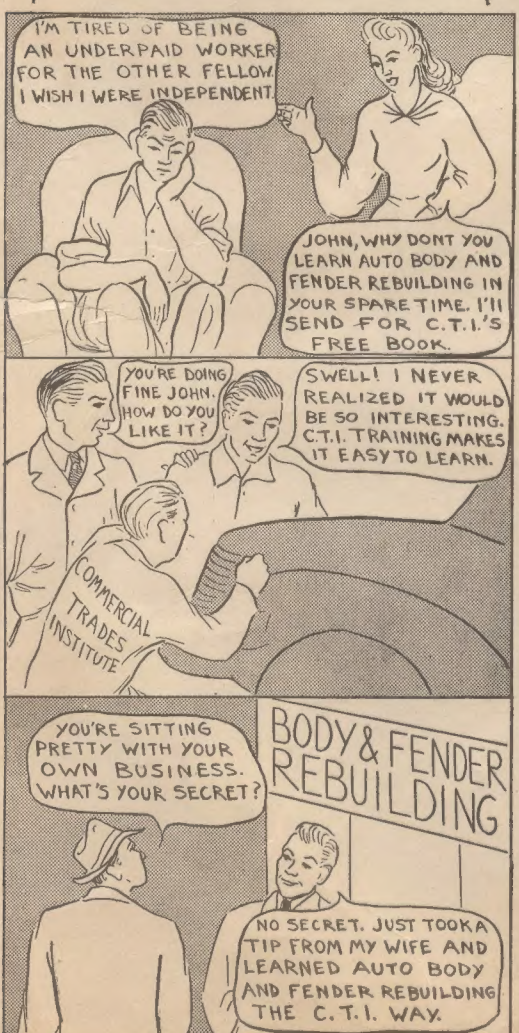

Western Trails
15¢
THE LAW IN LYNCH TOWN by Joseph Cummings

FREE
This Valuable Book

Planning SUCCESS in a Business of Your Own


I'M TIRED OF BEING AN UNDERPAID WORKER FOR THE OTHER FELLOW. I WISH I WERE INDEPENDENT.
JOHN, WHY DONT YOU LEARN AUTO BODY AND FENDER REBUILDING IN YOUR SPARE TIME. I'll SEND FOR C.T.I.'S FREE BOOK.
YOU'RE DOING FINE JOHN. HOW DO YOU LIKE IT?
SWELL! I NEVER REALIZED IT WOULD BE SO INTERESTING. C.T.I. TRAINING MAKES IT EASY TO LEARN.
COMMERCIAL TRADES INSTITUTE
YOU'RE SITTING PRETTY WITH YOUR OWN BUSINESS. WHAT'S YOUR SECRET?
BODY & FENDER REBUILDING
NO SECRET. JUST TOOKA TIP FROM MY WIFE AND LEARNED AUTO BODY AND FENDER REBUILDING THE C.T.I. WAY.

Tired of Working for the Other Fellow?

Be Your Own Boss

AUTO BODY & FENDER REBUILDING

It's great to be your own boss—have something of your own—build it year by year until it is providing you a good income and security. When you are in business for yourself you know that only your own efforts, energy, and ability limit your income. If you are in the right field—where your services are needed and where the pay is high—if you have the kind of practical, workable training that prepares you to do a good job quickly—then you can go into business with full confidence in the future.

Now Is the Time to Make Your Start and Prepare to Grow in the Big Years Ahead

You can start a business in BODY & FENDER REBUILDING with confidence you are getting into a big, expanding, active field. Think of the "Used Car" branch of the industry alone—big business with millions and millions of dollars in profits. Experienced Body & Fender Rebuilders know how to make used cars look like new—know how to increase their value for resale so that they bring in profits. They know how to take a car that has been banged up in an accident and restore its original beauty.

Begin Your Training at Home or Come Directly to Shops

Begin your training at home in spare time, finish in our big modern shops, or come directly to the shops. At home you get C.T.I.'s SHOP PROVED HOME STUDY instruction—actual shop experience has gone into the practical lesson assignments. That is why it is easy for mechanically inclined men to learn by our Home Training and start on actual Body and Fender Rebuilding work.

Mail Coupon for Your FREE COPY "Planning SUCCESS in a Business of Your Own"

C.T.I. has prepared the valuable booklet PLANNING SUCCESS IN A BUSINESS OF YOUR OWN for ambitious men sincerely interested in going into business for themselves. If you want a copy all you have to do is mail the coupon below. Your request does not obligate you in any way. Mail the coupon today.

NON-VETERANS
Don't let the lack of ready cash prevent you from taking this training now. Investigate our low Easy-payment Plan, and our Pay-after-graduation Plan.

VETERANS
C.T.I. courses are approved under the G.I. Bill. Just mail coupon—we will handle all details.

Commercial Trades Institute, Dept. F13-10
1400 W. Greenleaf Avenue **Chicago 26, Illinois**

FILL OUT • CUT OUT • MAIL TODAY!

Commerical Trades Institute, Dept. F13-10
1400 W. Greenleaf, Chicago 26, Ill.

Please send me absolutely FREE a copy of the booklet PLANNING SUCCESS IN A BUSINESS OF YOUR OWN and other information about Auto Body & Fender Rebuilding.

( ) Veteran ( ) Non-Veteran

Name.....

Address.....

City..... State.....

Oct. 1948

Western Trails

Vol. XLIV No. 3

ONE AGAINST A GUNHAWK HORDE (Novelette) ..... CLIFTON ADAMS 2
Marshal Ringo learns that his own murder is slated as next on the renegade roster.

THE LAW IN LYNCH TOWN ..... JOSEPH COMMINGS 19
A mysterious hangman leads the lawman a grim chase.

BUM STEER FROM ARIZONA ..... JOE ARCHIBALD 29
With the advent of this fiddlefooted pair, the town of Brotherly Love becomes Bedlam.

MUSTANG MUSKETEER ..... STEVE HAIL 39
After his siesta the cook dishes out a .45 fiesta.

ALL ABOARD FOR BOOT HILL! (Novelette) ..... G. H. WILLIAMS 48
Skulduggery on the iron horse forces an ex-ranger to map out a new Colt career.

BLACK SHEEP BRAVADO ..... RAY GAULDEN 64
The holdup hombre slips up on his first powdersmoke performance.

THE TERRIBLE TEXAN ..... NAT MCKELVEY 70
Highlights in the adventurous life of a pioneer gunfighter.

STAMPEDE 74
Powder River Bill and his writin' rannyhans.

SWING THE HANGROPE HIGH! (Novelette) ..... WALKER A. TOMPKINS 76
Grat Logan rides into a necktie party for a man accused of his own crime.

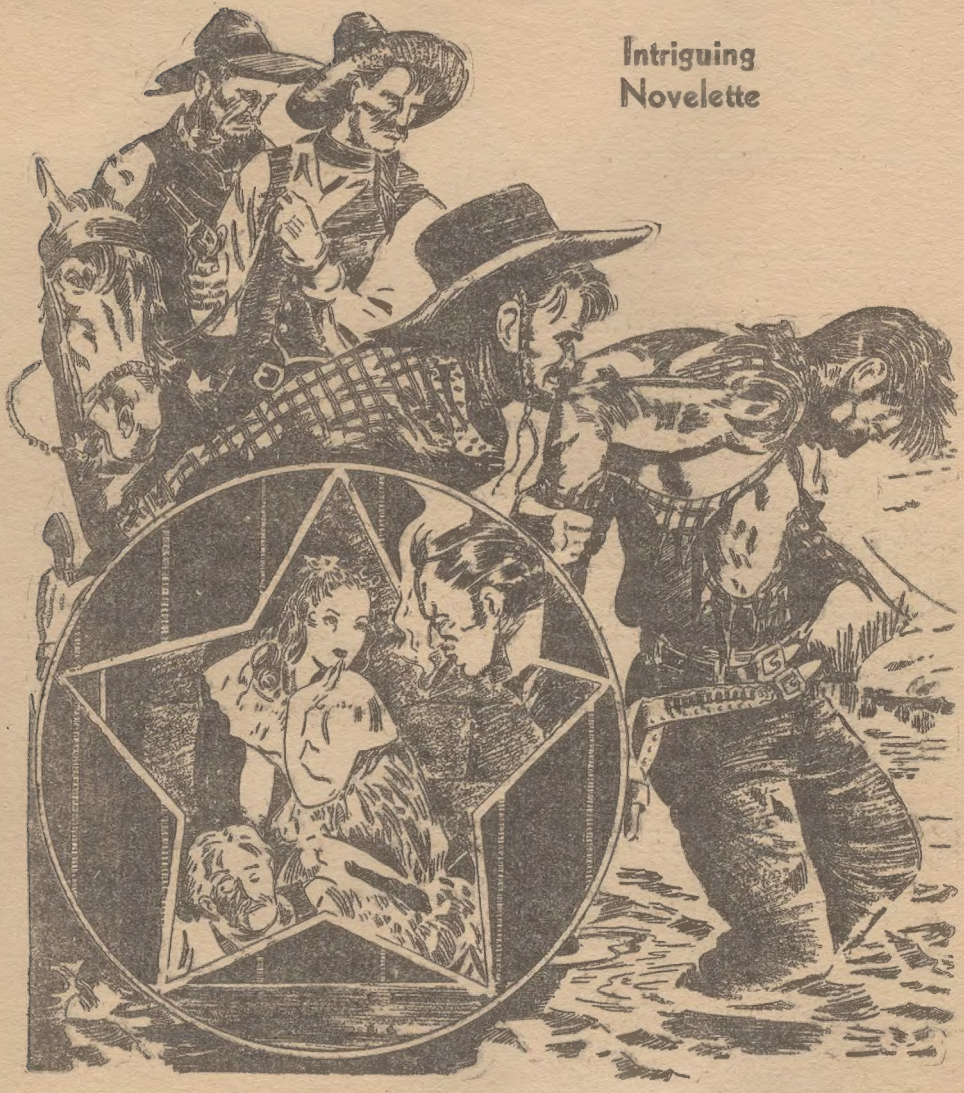
Cover by Norman Saunders

Published bi-monthly by A. A. Wyn, Inc., office of publication, 29 Worthington St., Springfield 3, Mass. A. A. Wyn, president. Editorial and executive offices, 23 W. 47th St., New York 19, N. Y. Entered as second-class matter November 14, 1928, at Springfield, Mass. under Act of March 3, 1879. Title registered in U. S. Patent Office. Copyright, 1948, by A. A. Wyn, Inc. Manuscripts will be handled with care, but this magazine assumes no responsibility for their safety. For advertising rates address Ace Fiction Group, Inc., 23 W. 47th St., New York 19, N. Y. Yearly Subscription 90 cents. Single copies, 15 cents. Please send all subscriptions and correspondence relating to subscriptions to A. A. Wyn, Inc., 23 West 47th Street, New York 19, N. Y.

This is an ACE Magazine

One Against a

Intriguing Novelette



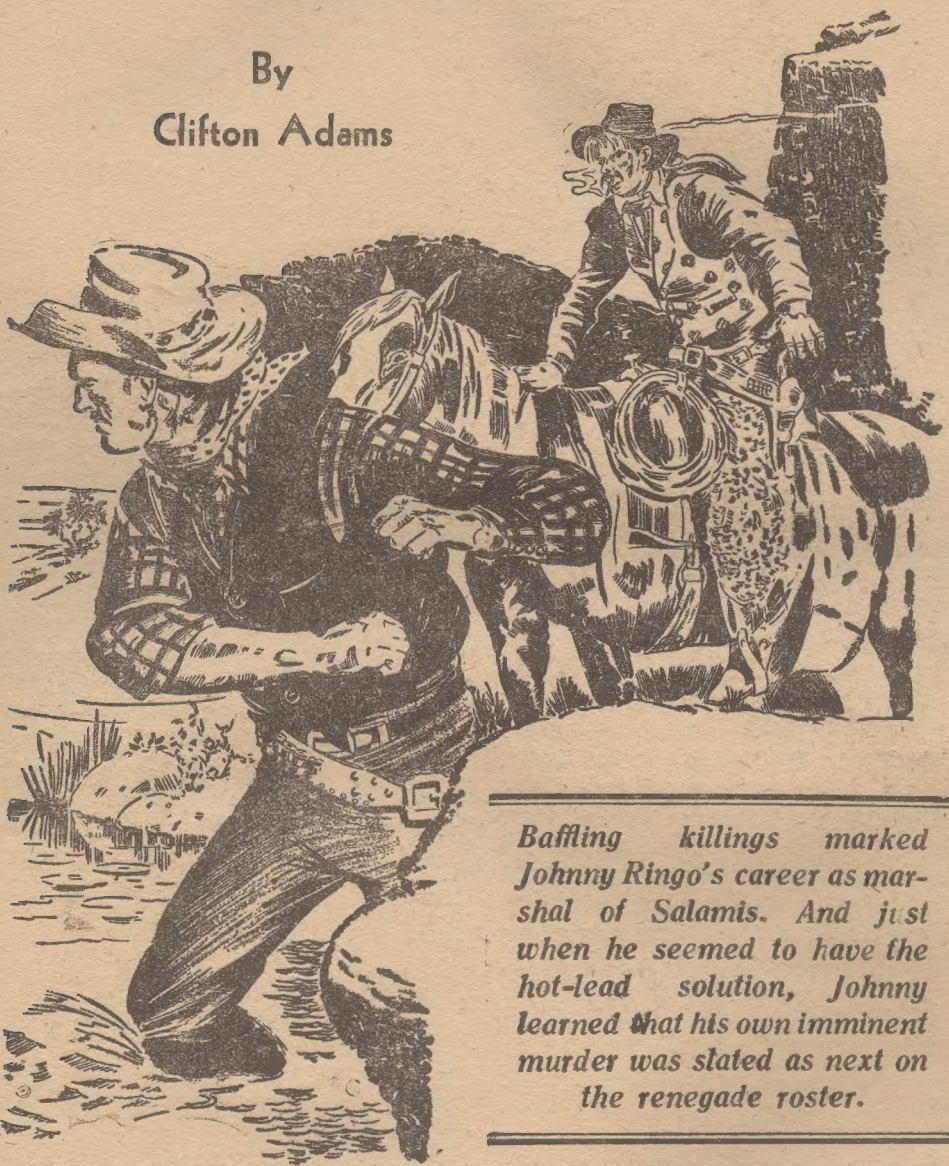
CHAPTER I

THAT day they cut the sky down and let it fall around Johnny Ringo's shoulders. There are days like that sometimes, when all the plans you've made so carefully start bubbling and blow up in your face. Everything that looked so neat and tidy a week before suddenly turns out to be a tangled mess like snarled barbed wire.

Johnny sat alone in the marshal's office, his only company a tallow-faced gunman in a cell at the back. He had been sitting there for a long time. Three days he had waited for something to happen and nothing had. Every once in a while he would glare at the bent point on his marshal's

Gunhawk Horde

By
Clifton Adams



Baffling killings marked Johnny Ringo's career as marshal of Salamis. And just when he seemed to have the hot-lead solution, Johnny learned that his own imminent murder was slated as next on the renegade roster.

badge and curse furiously to himself.

It was an old badge that had been handed down from one marshal to another for a long time. It wasn't much to look at, but that wasn't the reason for the cursing.

In the first place, he hadn't wanted to be a marshal. But it had seemed like a good idea at the time. He didn't like having his cattle shooed off across the border any more than the other cattlemen around Salamis. Anyway, when they offered him the job he took it. That had been two weeks ago.

Johnny Ringo got up and stretched. Time dragged slowly when there was nobody to talk to. The gunman stared at him for a minute with flat, dull eyes, then got off the bunk and walked to the barred door.

"How much longer are you going to try to keep me here, Ringo?" he said dryly. "They're goin' to laugh you out of town."

Ringo turned and stared passively at the gunman. Yeah, they were already laughing. Even the men who had put him in office. They were saying they would never have given him the job in the first place if they had known that Lou Garret was the one he suspected of the rustling. Johnny turned his back on the gunman and tried to forget about him.

"If you try to keep me here you're goin' to get more trouble than you ever thought about, Ringo," the dry voice went on.

JOHNNY didn't say anything. He went to the front door and stared out at the dusty street. He hoped the gunman was right. Trouble was what he wanted. That didn't make sense, but his whole plan was based on it and that's what he had been waiting for. He figured if he locked one of Lou Garret's gunmen up and passed the word around that he was ready to spill everything he knew about his boss, then Garret would tip his hand, or at least make a try at getting his man out of jail.

Nothing had happened. Three long days of waiting, and for nothing. People were beginning to say that Johnny had it in for Lou Garret because he wasn't sure whom Kathleen Parker would choose when she came back from the East.

Even as kids he hadn't liked Lou Garret, and the town people don't forget things like that. And they hadn't forgotten that Kathy Parker was the reason, even then.

Suddenly Johnny had all he could take of the office. He didn't want to look at it any more, or listen to the gunman. He went outside to where his horse was and got on.

He tried to tell himself that he ought to get outside for a while and try to get things straight in his mind. But he knew that wasn't the reason. He rode straight for a hill that stood to the west of town and looked down at the narrow road that wound below him. In a few minutes the Kansas City stage would round the bend in the road, and Kathy would be on it.

It had been a long time. Four years since she had gone away to school in the East. Four years since he had ridden over to old Elijah Parker's spread to see her. He remembered the times they used to ride up here, Johnny and Kathy, and sometimes her brother Rod. Here where the only sound was the wind flowing over the short grass, and here and there a dry flutter of a grasshopper popping up.

He sat there on the hilltop and listened to the wind. The town below him was quiet. Two horsemen came from out of the east, hit the road at the foot of the hill, and headed toward town. In a few minutes two more horsemen joined them. They didn't speak. Little dust feathers plumed up from their horses' hoofs and fell in the wind.

Johnny Ringo watched the riders for a moment, absently, then turned his gaze back to the bend in the road where the stage would appear.

He waited. He glanced at the town and saw that the riders had hitched in front of the jail. Then the stage skittered around the curve in the road; six matched horses pranced, heads high. Johnny grinned and strained his eyes to get a sight of Kathy, but a cloud of dust boiled up under the stage wheels and he saw nothing. The stage righted, the driver shouted as the horses straightened out and bore into the short stretch to town.

Johnny spurred his horse and they started edging down the side of the hill. If he hurried he ought to make it in town about the same time the stage

did. Suddenly the grin came off his face. Two pistol shots crashed down in the town. Then two more. Johnny Ringo didn't stop to wonder where it came from; he kicked his horse hard and jerked him over in the direction of town.

He pushed his horse in front of the stage before they reached the outskirts of town. People were already collecting in front of the jail, so Johnny made for that. He pulled up to the hitchrail and swung down.

AFTER he had pushed his way through the crowd into the jail he saw what had happened. A curse rushed up in his throat, but cursing wouldn't do any good now. One of the cell doors gaped open, the one that a few minutes ago had held Garret's gunman. It was empty. In front of the cell door there was a man crumpled on the floor with his arms folded uncomfortably under him. He lay motionless, his wide eyes staring at the jail wall, but not seeing a thing.

"Elijah!" Johnny dropped to one knee and turned the old man over. Glass eyes stared flatly at him. "Somebody get a doctor, quick!"

"It's too late, Johnny." A dazed deputy shuffled up and stood over them, one arm limp at his side. Blood welled up at his shoulder and little streams of it crawled down his arm and dropped from his fingers. "Old man Parker is dead."

The deputy was right. The glass eyes were dead eyes. They were getting deader every minute.

"There were four of them," the deputy said. "I seen them ride off, but I didn't get a good look at any of them. Old Parker must of come in while they was doin' the job and they got him. I walked up just as they was leavin'. I didn't have a chance to go for my gun or anything else."

That was fine. Four men ride up in the bright light of day, take his prisoner, shoot his only deputy, and kill an old man like Elijah Parker. They could have a big laugh now. The gunman had been right, they would laugh him out of town.

The deputy's eyes were sick. He shook his head dumbly to clear it. "I think they headed east, over toward Kimble's Ridge. They'll be hard to catch once they get in the woods."

With a fifteen-minute start they would be hard to catch anywhere. Johnny stood up quickly and faced the men crowding into the office. "Men, get your horses and guns. If we have any luck we can catch them before the sun goes down."

A big rawboned man with a saddle-gun cradled in one arm pushed his way through the crowd. "Lou Garret has already got a posse together and headed east. If you ride hard, marshal, maybe you can catch up to them."

Johnny felt heat rush to his cheeks and the men laughed. He pushed blindly through the pressing mob and made his way to his horse.

He had forgotten about the stage. As he got on his horse it rattled through the dusty street and lurched to a halt up ahead at the station. He hadn't really stopped to put things together, things had happened too fast. Now they came to him without any help, sickeningly clear.

There in the office the man on the floor had been a dead man and that was all. Only when he glimpsed Kathy being helped down from the stage did it hit him. After four years she had come home just in time to find her father dead.

Johnny kicked his horse and wheeled in the street. He rode hard past the stage, down to the end of the street, then he pulled his horse over to the east toward Kimble's Ridge. He told himself that he was riding to catch the posse, but he knew that wasn't the reason. He was riding to get away from town. He didn't want to see Kathy's eyes when they told her about her father, when she looked at the old man crumpled there on the office floor.

He managed to push that out of his

mind for a while. There was nothing but riding. He trailed the posse to the crest of the Ridge and down the other side into the wooded country. At the edge of a shallow creek Garret had taken the posse to the north and headed upstream. Johnny pulled his horse up and tried to think.

It didn't make sense. That way led to the flatlands with no place for an outlaw to hide. To the south was the border and the hills. If an outlaw wanted to get away he wouldn't think twice about which way to go. Johnny thought about it some more and decided that it made sense after all. If the four gunmen were Garret's men he would want to get the posse off their trail. Johnny pointed his horse south and rode.

He searched the ground for sign, but it wasn't any good. They could have gone downstream a way and turned south anywhere. The only thing he had to go on was common sense.

That led him to the hills and there still wasn't any sign of the gunmen. Little doubts wormed their way into his mind and began to grow. What if Garret had been right? What if the gunmen hadn't been Garret's men after all and the posse had found signs that led to the north? He didn't think that's the way it was, but he couldn't be sure. There was only one way to be sure and that was to find the gunmen where common sense told him they would be.

THIS time common sense didn't work. He searched the hills and the wooded area and found nothing. The sun slid far to the west, turned a dazzling orange, and began to die. In a few minutes it would be dark. If the gunmen had come this way he had missed their trail. By the time darkness covered the country they would be across the border.

He didn't give up until it was dark, and then he couldn't do anything else. He pulled his horse around and headed back toward the town of Salamis.

It was a long ride back, but even so he got to town faster than he had wanted. There were things in town that he wasn't ready to face. There would be Kathy, and her brother Rod. And there would be a dead old man. But time plays tricks like that sometimes, and all too soon he had topped the ridge and was looking down at the town.

Most of it was in darkness. Two saloons were still open, and a lamp flickered in the marshal's office. The rest of the town was quiet. He rode on down to the end of the street where his office was, left his horse at the rail, and went in. He had company.

The man waiting for him was a lean, serious-faced man. His hair was bleached almost white by the sun. His eyes were blue and steady, and there was no nonsense in them. He sat in a chair beside the desk and watched Johnny come in. His face didn't give a hint of what was going on inside him.

This man was one of the reasons that Johnny hadn't hurried back. He looked at the man and tried to think of something to say. There wasn't anything, not anything that would do any good. He walked over to his desk and dropped wearily in the tilt-back chair.

"Hello, Rod."

"Hello, Johnny." There was nothing in his voice to reveal the fact that his father had been killed a few hours ago. He took a sack of tobacco out of his shirt pocket, rolled a thin cigarette, and slipped it between his lips. "You didn't ever catch the posse, did you, Johnny?"

"I didn't bother to follow them any farther than the creek. A man trying to escape a posse would be crazy to go to the north."

"Garret didn't think it was crazy. Did you find anything to the south?"

Johnny knew that he would have to answer that question sooner or later. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "No, Rod, I didn't find anything."

Rod Parker lit his cigarette and dragged deeply. He seemed to be thinking something over in his mind, then finally he said, "Maybe you ought to take lessons from Garret on reading sign. They didn't think it would get him anything either. But it did."

Johnny jerked his head up and looked at that dry, serious face. "What do you mean?" he said. His voice came out a lot louder than he had meant for it to.

"They found two of them." Johnny jerked his head around and looked at the empty cells. Rod Parker read the question in his eyes before he could speak it. "You'll find them down by the creek. The last time I saw them they were swinging high with their own ropes."

Johnny Ringo stood up quickly and stared down at the light-haired man. "I didn't ask for this job," he said quietly, "but I got it, and I'm the marshal. Whoever was responsible for the lynching will be locked up and tried for murder."

Rod Parker shook his head slowly. "You can't lock up twenty-five or thirty men and try them for murder. It was just one of those things."

CHAPTER II

JUST one of those things. . . . Johnny gritted his teeth until his jaws ached, but he knew Rod was right. Old man Parker had been a good man in a town where good men were scarce. People don't stop to think much when a man like that gets killed. For a minute there was nothing to say. There were a lot of things he wanted to say, but they wouldn't do any good at a time like this. He got hold of himself and spoke between his teeth.

"Who were they, these two men that Garret hanged?"

"I didn't say Garret hanged them. Maybe he started it, I don't know. They were a couple of Mexicans. We never figured it was Mexicans coming across the border and getting our cattle, but that's the way it looks."

"They couldn't be Mexicans." At first Johnny couldn't be sure just how he knew that the gunmen couldn't be Mexicans—and then he remembered the four men he had seen riding into town. The four men that had hitched in front of the jail just before the shooting started. They hadn't been Mexicans.

Johnny got it all together in his mind and told it. About the riders, the shooting, everything. "Does it sound like Mexicans—four of them riding into town, breaking the jail, just to get one of Garret's gunmen out?"

Rod Parker dropped his cigarette and mashed it out with a boot. "You can't tell about Mexicans." He looked up at Johnny and spoke quietly. "You still think the killers were Garret's men, don't you?"

Johnny sat down and tried to think. He needed somebody on his side. He needed this man who was old Elijah Parker's son—and Kathy Parker's brother. He spoke slowly, thinking his way as he went.

"I guess I'm about the only one that thinks Garret has anything to do with it. But things don't add up. A few years back he didn't have any more than you have, or I have. Now he owns half the town and one of the biggest strings of beef this side of Abilene. Does that make sense?"

"Maybe he's smart and knows how to manage money. That's what people say. They say maybe you're jealous because he's done so well."

Johnny swallowed hard. He'd asked for that one. He knew that's what people said, but that didn't make it any easier to listen to.

"I don't know," Rod said quietly. "What's between you and Garret is your business. I just know one thing—there were four men in that killing and some of them anyway are still loose. I want a hand in catching them. Your deputy got hit today and he's not going to be much good for a while. I

figured if you needed another man I'd put in for the job."

Whatever Rod Parker thought about Johnny wouldn't make any difference in how he handled the job. The .45 tied to his thigh was just a tool—a tool that he would work with if he had to, but that was all. Johnny thought about it and made up his mind.

"You've got a job. There's just one thing to remember. As long as I am marshal things will be done my way. Stand up and raise your right hand."

After it was over they shook hands. Johnny said, "I need a good man, Rod. I'm glad it's you. It's kind of like it used to be, me and you and Kathy."

Rod didn't say anything. He took the badge, pinned it on, and turned for the door. He hesitated a minute before he went out and faced Johnny.

"There's something I think you ought to know," he said. "From here on out it'll be just you and me. Kathy won't be in it."

It wasn't until the next day that Johnny found out what he meant. That day the town was quiet. Even the saloons closed for the funeral. The drunks and gunmen sensed that this day wasn't the same as the others and they slipped uneasily out of town to wait until the unnerving quietness was gone.

THEY held the services in the little wooden church at the end of the street. It wasn't often the church was full, but this time it was. Elijah Parker had had a lot of friends. Johnny Ringo waited in the silent overflow of them outside the church and watched them bring the casket out and take it around to the family plot in the back.

He watched Kathy and wanted to say something to her. He had wanted to before now but somehow he hadn't. Finally it was over and the silent crowd scattered slowly and moved away in different directions. Johnny moved over to where she was.

"Kathy—"

He didn't say any more. She looked up and there was something in her eyes that stopped him. They were red eyes and swollen, but they were dry. There wouldn't be any relief in tears for a girl like Kathy Parker, not for a long time. She looked at him and said one word.

"Marshal."

She didn't have to say anything else. Her eyes said the rest. They told how she blamed him for her father's death. *Marshal.* It was just a word, spoken so low that it was hardly audible. But there was something in it that lashed like a whip. Then he knew what Rod Parker had meant. "From here on out it'll be just me and you."

Then there was another voice, a smooth, cultivated voice. Too cultivated for this country.

"You're the marshal, Ringo, but that doesn't give you license to force yourself on a lady at a time like this." Johnny turned quickly and faced Lou Garret.

Garret was dressed in black, as becomes a man grieving a lost friend. So black and immaculate that it made Johnny feel that it was an insult for him to be there in his working clothes. Garret sensed that. His thin face was sober, but somewhere behind those slate eyes Johnny thought he could see a smile. Garret stepped easily between them and touched Kathy's arm.

"I have a carriage waiting, Kathy. My driver will take you home if you're ready now."

The only thought Johnny had was smashing that thin, delicate nose all over Garret's pale face, and he couldn't do a thing. He watched the gloved hand take Kathy's arm and guide her over to a buggy. He couldn't do anything about that either.

After a while he went back to the office. There wasn't anywhere else to go. As far as the town was concerned, everything was over. The Mexicans had done it. Lou Garret had caught two of them and that made him a hero. The other two they didn't expect to catch. Mexicans are like that.

He didn't know how long he sat there. The long afternoon wore on and the shadows shifted and stretched long in the street. He was wishing that he had never taken the marshal's job. He was wishing that there was something he could say to Kathy. He was wishing a lot of things when Rod came in with the Mexican kid.

He didn't look to be more than eighteen, but you can't always tell about Mexicans. He wore skin-tight pants with an empty holster tied to his right thigh. Rod Parker had the .45 that had come out of it plunged in his waistband. His own gun was at the Mexican's side.

Rod pushed the kid in hurriedly, closed the office door, and bolted it. "We've got another one to go with the ones hanging on the creek," he said tightly. He shoved the kid over to the corner of the room and into a chair. "He was about to bushwhack Lou Garret when I caught him. You'd better lock him up tight if you want to keep him. There's already talk going around, and I wouldn't be surprised if we didn't have another necktie party on our hands before long."

HOT fire smoldered way at the back of the Mexican's dark eyes, but he didn't look scared. Johnny got up, went quickly to the window and scanned the street. There was nothing going on yet that looked like a hanging party. He turned to Rod.

"You'd better tell me about it. Where did you find him, and how do you know he's one of the killers?"

"Who else would he be? I just happened to see him down by the church. He jumped Garret there and dared him to draw."

Johnny studied the kid's face. It was a dark, serious face, handsome according to Mexican standards, but it didn't tell a thing. "Dared him to draw," Johnny heard himself saying. "That's not bushwhacking."

Rod Parker turned and glared at him darkly. "Are you taking the Mexican's side in this, Johnny? That's a pretty long way to go just because you don't like Lou Garret. Anyway, word is going around that it was a bushwhacking. You're going to have a hard time convincing a hanging mob that it wasn't."

"Yeah," Johnny murmured. "Maybe Lou wants the word to get around. Maybe he's got reasons to want the kid out of the way." He looked at the Mexican. "What is your name?"

"Juan Pedro Gomez. My father was Pablo Gomez, a herder of sheep to the south of Salamis."

Johnny looked closely at the dark face. There was something in the way Juan Pedro Gomez spoke of his father in the past tense that made him wonder.

"Yesterday my father and my brother made camp by the stream south of town. From the top of a hill I see the Americans come and kill them. I am too far away to help. When I get there they are dead and the Americans are gone."

He spoke quickly in little clipped words. There was no emotion in his voice, just the fire in those dark eyes.

"The man you call Garret," the kid added. "He was the leader. He was responsible for the death of my father and my brother."

For a minute it was quiet. Johnny looked at the Mexican and then at Rod. "Could it have been that way?"

"It could have been any way. It could have been Garret's way."

It could have been anything. But Johnny knew one thing, the town people weren't going to believe any Mexican kid, not now. If they got their minds set on a hanging, a barred door wasn't going to change their minds. Suddenly he laughed without humor. It sounded hard in the room. His old plan was working against him again, except this time he had a Mexican kid for bait instead of one of Garret's gunmen. Garret had got out of it before. He would get out of it this time. It wouldn't take much talking to get the kid hanged before people got a chance to hear his side of the story.

Rod got the keys out of the desk and unlocked one of the empty cells, but Johnny stopped him.

"Wait. He won't have a chance in there if a mob gets a rope in their hands."

He turned around slowly and said very quietly, "You're not going to turn him loose, Johnny. This kid might be one of the gunmen that killed my pap." He shook his head from side to side. "And you're not going to turn him loose."

"I'm not going to turn him loose, but we've got to get him out of here. Can't you see, Garret can't afford to let this kid go on living. If he talks long enough somebody might believe him and start asking questions. He can't afford that."

Rod shook his head again. "You still want to get something on Garret. Well, you're the boss. As long as you don't let him go we'll do what you say."

CHAPTER III

THEY didn't have much time. Garret would have to act fast while the people were stirred up. He tried to think of a place they could take the kid until the town had cooled down. He made up his mind quickly and turned to Rod.

"We've got to take him somewhere that Garret wouldn't think of looking. How about your spread? If the kid is suspected of killing your father they wouldn't be apt to suspect you of taking care of him. That's our best bet, anyway until we can think of something better."

Rod didn't like it, but there was nothing much he could do about it and keep his job. He shrugged a little and looked flatly at the kid. "All right," he said finally. "I'll get the horses and bring them around to the back. I'll take him out myself."

He went to the door and unbolted it. He paused for just a minute and spoke over his shoulder. "I don't expect Kathy will like it. But I guess that doesn't make any difference now." He went out and closed the door behind him.

Rod brought the two horses around to the back and got the Mexican on one of them. The rest of it wasn't much trouble. The sun had dropped low in the west and in the dusk one rider looked much like another. Anyway, the crowd was beginning to gather out front now and they didn't pay much attention to what took place in the back. Johnny watched the two as they edged away behind the buildings and cut across country in the direction of the Parker spread.

The two riders became shapeless figures in the dusk and then disappeared. Johnny bolted the back door and turned to the front. He didn't have anything to worry about now—except an angry mob of half a hundred men.

The crowd had gathered fast. An angry mumble rolled in the gray dusk as they milled around. So far it was just an angry group of men with nobody at the head. But the minute somebody spoke up and made himself the leader it would be a mob.

Johnny waited at the front window. He knew somebody would speak up and he knew who it would be. It was just a matter of waiting.

It was maybe five minutes before he heard it. That too smooth, too cultured voice that he had been waiting for.

"All right, men, what are we waiting for? Inside there is the killer of your old friend and mine, old Elijah Parker. Are we going to do anything about it?"

The mumbling of the crowd rose to an angry yell.

"All right. Give him the same as the other two got." Lou Garret raised his voice and shouted. "Marshal, are you going to open the door or are we going to have to break it in?"

Johnny didn't do anything. Every minute was eating up time and that was what he wanted. Enough time for Rod and the Mexican kid to get clear.

The voice of the mob rose again. "All right," Garret shouted. "Break it in!"

The weight of hard shoulders hit the door. The hinges creaked, but that was all. The door was strong oak; it would last for a long time if they didn't bring up a battering ram. The shoulders hit the door again and didn't do any better than they had the first time. After one more try they gave it up and called for help.

IT TOOK some time to get the ram. Five minutes, maybe ten. Johnny stood by the window and watched and listened as Garret kept up the pitch of the mob. At last a half a dozen men came carrying a heavy oak log. They pushed their way through the mob and to the door.

The door wouldn't hold against that. One lunge, two at the most, and the door would be ripped from its hinges. But it didn't make any difference now. Johnny had got the time he had been playing for and that was what was important. When he saw the log coming he stepped forward, unbolted the door, and faced the mob.

A yell went up and the men in front rushed forward. There wasn't any use trying to talk to men like that. Johnny's hand shot down and came up with his .45. It roared once just over the men's heads, the fiery, muzzle-blast in their faces. They stopped. The .45 crashed again and Johnny stepped forward.

Breaking a door down was one thing, but getting shot at was another. The men who had surged forward took hesitating steps backward. Johnny shouted at them quickly before Garret had another chance to push them on.

"Men, you're wasting your time. The prisoner's not here."

He swung the door wide so they could see the empty cells. The mumble started again, but a good look at that .45 stopped it.

"The prisoner's not here," Johnny shouted again. "He's in the hands of the law and that's where he's going to stay. When you cool down we'll bring him back and put him on trial."

The mob didn't like it. They looked at Lou Garret for instructions, but he wasn't much help. He couldn't do anything either, without the prisoner.

An idea began to go to work in the back of Johnny's mind. His plan hadn't worked out before, but that was because Garret had known all along what he was doing. Now he didn't. If he planted an idea in the people's minds now, maybe it would start growing. Maybe by the time he brought the Mexican back they would be willing to listen to him.

Most of the anger had left the mob now, and it was milling restlessly. Johnny held up his hand. "Just a minute, men. If this had gone off the way you wanted, another innocent man would be hanging now. I want to get the man responsible for rustling our cattle and killing old Elijah Parker as much as anybody, but this is not the way to do it."

The men began to settle down. Garret didn't do anything to stir them up again. He didn't dare to now.

"I want to give you some things to think about," Johnny shouted, "when you cool off—" he looked down at Lou Garret—"and when you don't have somebody to try to get you to take the law in your own hands."

The crowd was listening now. Johnny slipped his .45 back in his holster and went on.

"First, Lou Garret wasn't bushwhacked. He was dared to draw and he wouldn't do it. Rod Parker himself will vouch for that. Next, why is Lou Garret so set on hanging people before they have a chance to talk? Could it be that Lou is afraid that they'll say something he doesn't want anybody to hear? And why would four Mexicans take a chance like they did to get an American gunman out of jail? I saw those men and they weren't Mexicans, but I don't want you to take my word for it, I just want you to think."

Lou Garret's face was white with rage. He had lost his control of the mob, he knew that, and there wasn't anything he could do about it. He got hold of himself and shrugged. "The man's crazy. You men can stand here and listen to him if you want to, but I'm not wasting my time."

He turned on his heel and marched away from the crowd. Johnny watched him, and he watched the crowd stir uneasily and slowly begin to break up. They hadn't believed anything he said, but they would be willing to listen to the kid's story—if the kid was alive then to tell it.

THERE wasn't a mob any more—just a crowd of half-angry, half-puzzled men not sure what to believe in. They watched Garret as he walked away and their faces didn't tell what they were thinking. Johnny waited for a minute in the doorway, then he turned and went inside. He was right back where he started now—waiting.

Wait until the townspeople settled down, wait until they had time to think, wait until Lou Garret was forced to show his hand. Johnny didn't think he would have to wait long. Lou ought to go right to work on hunting the kid down and getting him out of the way. When he did, Johnny intended to be there.

The next day dragged by and nothing happened. If his idea had started growing, the faces in town didn't show it. Just waiting. The idea of a lynching was out now; Garret couldn't stir the town up again like that. He would have to try something else.

But what? Johnny didn't know. Rod Parker still wasn't convinced. He didn't come back to the office until the next morning, and then he looked a lot of questions and spoke only when he was spoken to.

"The kid's locked up in the storm cellar," he said. "There's nobody at the ranch now but Kathy. I'd better go back and take care of him until you're ready to bring him back."

That would be the best thing to do, but you don't always do the best thing, not when there is a girl like Kathy in it.

"I've got to ask the kid some more questions," Johnny said. "You stay here and I'll see what I can find out."

He didn't have any questions to ask the kid. Rod knew that as well as anybody, but he didn't say anything. He shrugged once. "All right. If you say so."

That's all there was to it. Nothing about Kathy or anything else. He watched Johnny as he walked out, got on his horse, and rode off. Johnny turned once and Rod was standing in the door still watching. There was nothing in that sober face, unless it was a kind of pity. He wasn't the kind of man who liked to see people get hurt, and he knew that was the only thing Johnny could expect if he saw Kathy.

It wasn't a long way to the Parker spread. Johnny spurred his horse to the end of the street, then pulled over to the right to skirt Kimble's Ridge. He rode quietly. The only sound was the muffled thud of his horse's hoofs and the almost silent whine of the wind. He had ridden this trail often, when Kathy had been here before. He liked to make believe that it was the way it used to be, that old Elijah Parker would be there to invite him in, that Kathy would be waiting for him. Sometimes, when he listened hard enough he seemed to hear her laughing. But it was only the wind.

He rode to the east, behind the ridge and out of sight of town. They moved through the edge of the wooded country and slipped down to wade a shallow stream. He must have still been thinking of Kathy and the way things used to be. He didn't see the gunman until it was too late.

A voice said, "Stop where you are, marshal."

Johnny jerked his head up and looked into the big twin barrels of a shotgun.

The gunman grinned. He wasn't a

man who grinned often, but he was enjoying this.

"Remember, marshal, I told you that if you tried to keep me locked up in that two-by-four jail of yours that you'd get more trouble than you ever thought about?" The grin widened. "Well, marshal, you're about to find out what I mean."

CHAPTER IV

JOHNNY stared at that tallow face and those slaty eyes, at the man who two days ago had been his prisoner. It was the other way around now, and the shotgun made it plain that he couldn't do much about it. He could talk. He didn't think it would do any good, but he could try it.

"Did Lou Garret plant you out here to bushwhack me?"

"I'm not bushwhacking, marshal. There's just a question I want to ask you." The grin came off and the face was the same expressionless, slablike face that it had been in jail. "Do you think that you can prove that I work for Garret? Do you think you can do that, marshal?"

Johnny couldn't. He knew he couldn't, but he had started something now and he had to play it out.

"Maybe not, but I don't need proof to hang you for being in on the killing of old man Parker."

The face didn't change. The gunman nudged his horse over closer, reached out and got Johnny's gun and pushed it in his own waistband. "Maybe," he said. "Right now I can't see you hanging anybody." He pulled his horse back to a safe distance and kept the shotgun on Johnny's middle. "This question I mentioned, it's about that Mexican kid you picked up. All I want to know is, where is he?"

"Garret would like to know that, wouldn't he? If somebody started listening to that kid it would be dangerous." Johnny shook his head. "He's staying where he is until I figure it's time to bring him back."

The gunman shook his head slowly from side to side. "I was afraid it was going to be like this. It's my job to find out where the kid is and I'm not particular how I do it. I'm giving you one more chance to do it and stay in one piece."

Johnny didn't move.

The gunman put two fingers to his mouth and whistled shrilly. Two horsemen appeared out of some trees about a hundred yards up the creek. In a minute, two more riders came out of the trees and the four of them rode down to where the gunman had Johnny pinned.

There was something familiar about the four riders, but Johnny wasn't sure at first what it was. Then he was. They were the same four he had seen from the hilltop, the ones who had broken the jail and killed Elijah Parker.

They rode up silently and stopped a few yards away. They were run-of-the-mine gunmen of no particular shape or size, the kind that you find in most saloons, willing to shoot their grandmother for a half a bottle of rotgut. The one on the end had a long knife scar that ran from behind his ear to the corner of his mouth. He looked a little harder than the others, but maybe it was the scar that did that. Anyway, he seemed the oldest, and that gave him the right to speak.

"Don't tell me the marshal's going to be a bad boy and not tell us what he knows?"

"He'll tell us all right," the tallow-faced gunman said. He motioned to Johnny with his shotgun. "Get down."

He couldn't argue with a shotgun and four .45's. He got down. The man with the scar and one of his pals got down at the same time, grabbed Johnny's arms and held them behind his back. Tallow face seemed to think it over. He wondered if he ought to ask his question again or get down and go to work.

He decided a question wouldn't do any good, not now. He got down,

walked over to Johnny, and smashed a big fist in his face without giving it another thought.

The fist shot in without warning. Johnny didn't have time to duck or ride with the punch or anything else. It wouldn't have done much good anyway with both arms being held behind his back. It was a hard, jarring punch that snapped his head back and burst his lips. Hot salty blood filled his mouth and dripped warmly off his chin.

The fist pulled back like a big mechanical hammer and crashed in again, a dull jarring thud that made everything leap up in brilliant reds. Then blackness rushed in. His head sagged heavily. Inside his skull where his brains ought to be was nothing but soggy mud. His knees buckled and he began to sag. Hands jerked him up roughly and a hand he didn't see at all slapped him sharply across his face.

THE slap cleared things up a little. He fought his way back to consciousness and stared blankly at Tallow Face. That was a hell of a sight to fight your way back to consciousness for. Tallow Face pulled his fist back for another blow, but then he changed his mind.

"This fight is a little one-sided," he said drily. "I arranged it that way so I could last a long time if I had to. Do you want to go another round or would you like to tell us where the Mexican is?"

Two punches like that make a man do things without thinking. He shook his head. He wasn't sure what he would have done if he had had time to think about it.

Tallow Face shrugged. "If that's the way you want it," he said. "I've got plenty of time." Johnny's face caught the fist again as it smashed in.

There's no way of telling how long a thing like that goes on. It's never as long as you think it is. After a while it didn't hurt so much. The fist would loom up like a balloon in front of his face and explode. There would be a sickening, jarring thud and that was all. After a while there wasn't anything.

Darkness closed in. He didn't have to look at Tallow Face or feel those hammering fists or anything else, just close his eyes and sleep there in the darkness. Everything was fine.

But things don't stay fine for long when there is a man like Tallow Face at work. Cool water sloshed in Johnny's face. He like that. He licked some of it along the edges of his split lips and let it trickle down his tongue. But then a lot of water sloshed in his face. It got in his nose and mouth and and made him cough and choke. A sharp-toed boot slammed in his ribs.

"Get him up," Tallow Face's dry voice said.

Hands pulled roughly at his arms and jerked him to his feet. It was tricky standing up. The landscape seemed to tilt on one edge and spin. Johnny closed his eyes for a second and then opened them and things settled down. He could see Tallow Face as well as ever. He decided he liked the spinning better.

But you don't always get what you want. "That was round two, marshal," Tallow Face said. "From here on out things may get a little rough. Do you want to stop it now and tell us where the Mexican is?"

It took a while to put the words together and make sense out of them. After he did it he wondered why he bothered. He wasn't going to tell anybody anything. Not that he liked to get his face pushed in, not that he liked the Mexican kid particularly, it was just that he wasn't going to give Tallow Face the satisfaction of finishing his job. Maybe it was just an ornery streak. Maybe tomorrow he'd regret it—if he lived that long. Anyway, that was tomorrow. He opened his mouth and croaked:

"Go to hell."

Those were the last words he spoke for a long time.

A YEAR later, or maybe it was ten minutes, he began hearing things again. Birds yammered idiotically in the trees along the creek bank. Wind rattled the dry leaves and made little swishing sounds as it swept along the short grass. Somewhere, a long way down the creek, a frog bellowed.

It was a lot of noise, or maybe it just seemed that it was a lot of noise because of his head. It felt like an overripe watermelon that had lain too long in the sun and any minute it was going to split open. He opened his eyes and the brilliance of the sun hit his eyeballs like hammers. He closed them, waited a minute, and tried again.

It wasn't so bad this time. He began to make out things. The trees along the creek, the short grass that speared up and needled his cheek—the shiny toes of a pair of black boots.

He looked at the boots for a long time. They were good boots, tailor-made probably, with little scrolls on the toes and brown butterflies across the instep. Not the kind of boots Tallow Face or his pals would wear. Johnny raised his gaze. Above the boots, above the black serge pants and coat, up to the pale face with the delicately molded nose.

Lou Garret stood looking down at him, coolly, speculatively, as if he had just found a curious-looking rodent and was nudging it around with his foot to see what made it tick. He looked as if he might stroll off any minute in search of something more to his taste in entertainment. He noticed that Johnny had his eyes open. That surprised him a little, but not enough to make any change in that pale face.

"You looked like you were dead," he said evenly as if he were discussing the weather. "I see very well that you're not."

Johnny thought of some answers for that, but somehow they didn't seem to be worth the trouble. He wondered where Tallow Face and his four friends were. He wondered if Lou Garret had been back on the creek bank somewhere watching the show. While he wondered he was trying to get up.

It wasn't easy. His arms and legs didn't work so well. If he had any brains left inside his skull they were scrambled so badly that they didn't help out much with the coordination. He finally made it to his knees—no thanks to Garret. From his knees it was a long way to standing on his hind legs like a human being is supposed to, but finally he did that too, just to show Garret he could.

Garret wasn't impressed. He reached inside his coat, somewhere behind a little .38 Colt clipped under his arm, and got a slim cigar. He bit the end off, spit it out. Very deliberately put the cigar in his mouth, lighted it, and blew clouds of smoke in Johnny's face.

"Somebody doesn't like you. You look like hell."

"Yeah," Johnny croaked. "I got enemies. You wouldn't know about that."

Garret smiled the faintest smile in the world. "You'll probably be telling people that I had something to do with it." He shook his head sadly. "That's what a man gets for trying to help someone when he's down," he said sardonically.

"I don't know how I'd made it without your help."

Garret was amused. He thought it over for a minute and said, "To tell the truth I don't know a thing about it. I was riding over to the Parker spread to call on Kathy when I found you here. Do you want to tell me about it?"

Johnny didn't. It hurt his mouth to talk. But Garret had given him something to think about. When he decided to send the Mexican over to the Parker place he had forgotten that Garret might be going out there to call on Kathy.

CHAPTER V

THAT complicated things. He didn't remember telling Tallow Face anything about the Mexican, but you can't remember everything you say if you get hit in the face enough times. And how about Tallow Face, what happened to him and the gunmen? There was no way of telling, unless they had thought they had killed him and had lit out for the hills.

Maybe Garret knew about the Mexican, maybe he didn't. Anyway, Johnny couldn't take a chance, he wanted to be with him what time he was at the Parker spread.

"You look like hell," Garret said for the second time. "If I were you I'd get back to town and get a stitching job done on that face."

"If you don't mind I'll just ride over to the Parkers' with you."

Garret shrugged as if it didn't make any difference to him. "I've got an idea it won't be very pleasant. Kathy feels pretty strongly about some things. You know how women are."

"Yeah," Johnny said. "I know." He turned and limped over to his horse and climbed on. It was a painful undertaking and took a lot of time. By the time he was in the saddle Garret had already got aboard and was headed to the east.

Johnny dragged along behind like a poor relative, with his spine punching holes in the top of his skull every time his horse put a hoof down. He was satisfied to trail behind. Anything rather than spur his horse into a spine-rattling gallop.

They rode across some flatland, down through a bend in the creek, and when they topped the other bank they were looking at the squat log ranch house that old Elijah Parker had made. If Lou Garret remembered that he was being followed he made no sign. He rode up to the hitching rack in front of the house, got off, dusted his black suit, and made for the front door.

As Johnny got closer he began to feel self-conscious about the way he looked. He guessed Garret was right, he *did* look like hell. After he had hitched his horse he went over to a pump at the side of the house and sloshed his face with the cold water. He wasn't sure if he looked any better, but he felt better. The empty holster on his hip bothered him more than anything else.

Garret knocked on the front door and waited. He looked absently at Johnny, in a way a man might look at a rather poor specimen of pack mule, then he turned back to the door.

Johnny heard her voice before he saw her. It was light and musical the way he had remembered it, but it wasn't laughing. It wouldn't laugh for a long time now.

"Oh, hello Lou," her voice said. "Won't you come inside?"

From the sound of her voice she wasn't displeased with seeing Garret there. It wasn't easy to take, but Johnny had been warned. If he stuck his neck out and got it stepped on he couldn't blame anybody but himself. He stepped up to the front porch and around to the door where she could see him.

"Hello, Kathy."

He couldn't think of anything else; he couldn't have said it anyway with Garret standing there.

Her eyes flew wide. A hundred little things flashed behind those eyes of hers, but she only said one word. "Johnny!"

MAYBE it was his face that did it. She started to move forward. She even reached out her hands as if to touch his, but then she remembered who he was. If he had been taking care of his job, perhaps her father would be alive—that was all she could remember. She stepped back abruptly and bit her lips. She got control of herself so quickly that it was almost as if she had never said his name.

When she spoke her voice was calm

and without emotion. "Are you here on business—marshal?"

If he had been holding on to any kind of hope it was gone now. "Yes," he said slowly. "I guess you could call it that."

She nodded coolly and held the screen door open. "Come on in, Lou," she said again. "And you, too, marshal."

Inside it was cool, and quiet. Curtains rustled stiffly in the window. Over in one corner of the big room a grandfather's clock clucked monotonously. That was all. Kathy moved into the room and motioned at chairs. "Won't you sit down." She looked at Johnny. "I can't imagine what your business can be, marshal. The four men you sent took the Mexican away not more than half an hour ago."

Maybe it stunned him. For a minute they were just words and didn't mean anything at all.

Then they did. It meant that he had failed again, that another innocent man would be dead, and there wasn't anything he could do about it. How had they known where to find the kid? He hadn't told them. He hadn't thought he had — but you can't be sure of what you say when you're unconscious.

What he was thinking must have shown in his face. Kathy looked at him and took a sudden step backward.

"Marshal—Johnny, is something wrong?"

"Yeah," his voice rapped out. He wheeled quickly to face Garret. "You think you got away with it again, don't you, Garret? I can't prove a thing. I can't prove the gunmen were your men or anything else." He started moving forward. "But I can beat it out of you, Lou, the way you had it beat out of me. Where did they take the kid?"

Lou Garret jumped back and his hand flashed under his arm and came out with the little .38. "Stay where you are, Ringo! Kathy, this man's crazy. Tell him to stay where he is or I'll shoot."

"Johnny!" she gasped. Johnny hardly heard her. He kept moving forward, looking into the tiny bore of that little Colt. Lou took another step backward and his finger started tightening on the trigger.

"I'm telling you for the last time, Ringo. Stay where you are."

There are times when a gun doesn't mean a thing and this was one of the times. He had to find out about the kid and he had to find out in a hurry. The only way he knew to do it was to get hold of Garret's white neck and wring it until he told.

GARRET had backed as far as he could go. If Johnny took another step he would have to shoot. Johnny didn't worry about it. He didn't even think about the gun. But he didn't take that other step.

The rapid clatter of hoofs outside jerked his head around. He looked at Garret and decided that neck could wait another second, then he stepped to the door and looked out.

At first he didn't believe it. It was the Mexican kid, alone. He rode like a drunk man, weaving dangerously in the saddle as he pulled up in the front yard. He dropped from the saddle and fell to his knees.

Johnny watched as the kid reached blindly for a stirrup and pulled himself up. He started for the house, staggering, leaning far to one side. Bright crimson soaked his shirt sleeve and dripped from his fingers.

He made it to the front porch and stood swaying in the doorway. He answered Johnny's questions before they could be asked.

"Señor," he gasped. "Four men, they try to hang Juan Pedro Gomez." He panted a minute until he got his breath. "But they had no luck. The man who is your deputy came upon them. There are only two of the gunmen now, Three are dead by the creek. The others are after me. I lost

them about a mile back, but they will be here."

"Rod!" Kathy's voice sounded hoarsely in the big room.

The kid looked at her and shook his head as if to clear it. "The deputy, señorita? I do not know. The gunmen left him for dead."

Then the kid saw Garret for the first time. Hate leapt into his eyes. "This man," he snapped, "would kill Juan Pedro Gomez even as he killed my father and my brother." He pulled himself up and took a step toward Garret. "He will not kill anybody—any more."

A faint smile twitched at Garret's thin mouth and Johnny snatched the kid's shirt and held him. There was nothing Garret would like more than for the kid to come at him. He could kill him in self-defense and nobody could do a thing about it. The smile vanished and Garret listened closely. There was another sound of horses outside.

From the door Johnny could see the two gunmen about a hundred yards from the house. He turned away from the door and looked at Garret.

"They're your men, Lou. How do you plan to take care of the witnesses when they come after the kid?"

The thin mouth twitched once. It was the only show of emotion Garret made. "Who's going to listen to a killing Mexican and a crazy marshal?" He swung the little .38 in a short arc. "Stay where you are, all of you."

Kathy started to say something, but it stopped in her throat. She stared at Garret, puzzled, unbelieving. Johnny turned to her.

"Is there a gun in the house, Kathy?"

"Yes, Father's."

"Get it, quick."

"Stay where you are!" Garret's voice was hard and brittle. "If anybody moves I shoot. Kathy, that goes for you as well as these two." He wasn't playing games now, things had gone too far for that. His gray eyes were suddenly live things where crazy little sparks danced. "That's right. Just the way you are. Now we'll wait."

THEY waited and the horses got closer. "Lou Garret," Kathy whispered, still not quite believing what her eyes saw. Garret wheeled on her. He tried hard to think of something to say, something that would put him in the right and still do away with the kid. He couldn't think of anything. He turned back and covered them with his gun and said nothing.

The horses came up to the hitching rack and two pairs of boots hit the ground. The boots thumped carefully, almost silently up to the front porch. Garret shouted, "The kid's in here! Come in and get him!"

The two gunmen appeared in the doorway, their .45's covering the room. The one with the scar saw the kid and grinned. His .45 roared.

A man doesn't stop to think at a time like that. He acts then or he doesn't ever get a chance to act at all. Johnny saw Scar Face grin, he saw the finger twitch and that was all. He jumped. As far and as hard as he could in Garret's direction. By the time the roar of the .45 jarred the room he had smashed across Garret's middle and crashed to the floor. The little .38 popped in the air and clattered at the kid's feet.

Scar Face must have been too sure of himself, or maybe it was the surprise of seeing Johnny leap across the room. His first shot missed. It slammed into the wall above the kid's head and before he could level his gun again the kid had dived for the .38.

The kid was fast. The little .38 barked twice and cut the grin off the gunman's face. A great look of surprise took its place. Scar Face's partner yelled. He wheeled on the kid just in time to get a .38 slug in his throat. His head jerked up, his eyes wide and hurt. He was dead before he hit the floor.

(Continued on page 47)

The Law in Lynch Town

By Joseph Commings

Instead of getting the low-down on that mysterious hangman, Sheriff Pike found a noose fashioned for his own neck.

HANGING him was part of the job. Catching Clint Sanger, trying him for stagecoach robbery and murder, and sentencing him to death were all part of the job too.

Five men were under the ash-leaved maple that bleak chill morning. They were all on horseback because they had spent most of their lives on horseback.

Sheriff Rainey Pike, with his

shaggy grizzled mane and barrel girth, swiftly tied a noose in the hemp with his fat fingers. His bird's-eye dotted shirt was large enough to cover a prairie schooner. Recently he'd said, "We're civilized in Kato Bluff now. We don't execute felons in the hotel these days. No more hanging 'em from the rafters during supper."

They were hanging Clint Sanger in lonely country far away from town.

Rainey Pike had always been squeamish about tight collars. When the noose was finished he handed it to Marty Mather, his full-time deputy. Mather was lean and sallow with a nervous-sounding cough, but he had plenty of nerve. He spurred forward under the tree limb to put the noose over Sanger's bared head.

Parson Jim Wiggin, robust and curly-haired, who'd helped capture Sanger and convict him, was mumbling over a little gilt-edged breviary, resting Sanger's soul in peace.

Aloof and drawn back a little from the others was Anselm Alcutt, the town's only judge. He was cold, gray, with clam eyes. He'd passed sentence and he was watching it carried out.

Nobody wanted to waste time—except perhaps Clint Sanger himself. Mather had put the noose around Sanger's neck and drawn it in snug. Pike and the others were watching closely. Sanger's last request was to die with his face covered. Pike had granted it. Mather took a gunny sack out of his saddle roll and fitted it over Sanger's head.

The horse stirred restlessly under Sanger. Pike nodded around at the others, then, his lips grim in his jowled face, he rode forward and circled the condemned man. He picked at the wrists crossed behind Sanger's back. They were tied tightly together. The murderer's booted feet had slipped back out of the toe fenders. He was waiting.

Pike took a long fold in his horse's reins to get them to quirt size, then gave the murderer's horse a resounding baste across the rump. With a shrill whinny the horse bounded forward.

Pike urged his own mount out of the way as the suspended body swung back, grazing him. Sanger squirmed and kicked convulsively, weaker and weaker, for almost thirty seconds, then he became motionless, swinging at the end of his rope. Pike motioned the other away. Justice was done. Sanger would hang there till nightfall, a warning to anyone who thought that Kato Bluff took lawbreakers lightly.

Pike trailed the others through the sparsely grown country and the morning mists. They walked their horses and there wasn't much conversation. Four minutes later they reached the first ridge. The others dropped down out of sight ahead of Pike. On the ridge he paused and turned his head back for a last look.

Clint Sanger had stopped swinging. He was just hanging.

AT THE head of Kato Bluff's main street the five men separated. Pike went on to his office in the blockhouse jail to take care of the day's petty business. He was alone most of the morning, sitting back in his protesting chair, smoking and chewing a stogie, and watching the people in the street through his barred window.

Gradually the town was forgetting Clint Sanger. It took time, like getting rattlesnake poison out of your blood. He'd been a complete stranger, a thoroughly bad-faced man with a bullet-cropped ear and a mouth that drooped like a gotch horn. Pike hadn't been able to find anyone who had an ounce of sympathy for that sidewinder. No one had wanted to defend him at the trial. In order to give him the fairest trial they could, they had to send to Twin Forks, a hundred miles away, for a defense lawyer.

Poor old Jeb Hawkins, the shotgun messenger who'd been the stagecoach robbery victim, had been an honest family man with four young 'uns. A wife and four fryin' size, mused Pike,

another charity case, unless we can find something for 'em to do. It all took money. Thinking about money, Pike began to wonder for the eleventeenth time where Sanger had hidden the loot he'd taken off the stagecoach.

The coach had been carrying a heavy, iron-bound chest. In it had been four leather bags containing gold, silver, and paper money amounting to $14,000. It was money that was to go into a county-sponsored irrigation project. It looked as if the town would have to forsake the irrigation work until the money was found.

A short time had elapsed between the robbing of the stagecoach and the finding of Sanger's trail. During that time he'd buried or hidden the chest someplace. When they caught him he didn't have a plugged nickel on him and he took the secret of the hiding place with him.

Pike puffed out his fat cheeks. He'd have to organize a hunt for that chest too. A sheriff's work is never done.

Marty Mather, the thin deputy, came in about noon. He carried a steel-jawed beartrap. His recreation was big-game trapping. "Anything stirring, Rainey?"

"Been listening to the grass grow." Pike stiffened his arms sideways and arched his back in the chair. "Ah-h-h! I could stretch a mile if I wasn't too lazy to walk back."

Mather had a funny look on his face. Pike wondered what he'd said. Stretch! Mather had been in the business of hanging a man that morning. I guess we're all techy, thought Pike.

Pike continued, "There's a lot we gotta do, but I ain't gonna disturb the peace of your young mind by even suggesting it."

Mather started to grin. "If green-up time's got you, why don't you go home for an afternoon snooze? I'll take over. Got to fix the spring on this." He laid the trap by the wall.

"Nah, Marty. I'll grab holt of myself. Let's start some checkers."

They played checkers for the rest of the afternoon. At dusk they locked up the jail and went across the street to the Nostrand House, hotel and stage stand, for supper. They came back to the jailhouse and loafed around and yawned some more.

It was the lull before the terror.

At eight o'clock a man stuck an awed face into the jail. Pike recognized him as one of the town's loafers. He was harmless as a sick pup. He stammered, "Sheriff, I was passin' back o' the jedge's house an' I seed his shadder on the winder."

The only judge who lived in Kato Bluff was old Anselm Alcutt.

Pike didn't pay much attention and said without looking up, "He usually is home at this time. Your move, Marty."

The loafer squeaked, "The shadder was strung up! Hanged!"

Pike scraped back his chair and got up. "Are you riding me?"

"So help me, sheriff, I seed it an' run all the way!"

A grim look stabbed between Pike and Mather. They both reached for their gunbelts and followed the loafer out into the night.

PEOPLE were moving around the judge's house. Some of them had lanterns in their hands and the glow flickered between their moving legs like lightning bugs. The loafer must have belched the news out to everyone he'd met on the way to the jail.

Men got out of the way as Pike's weight creaked the floor boards of the back porch.

"There ain't a thing we kin do for him," said someone. "We left him there for you, Rainey."

Rainey Pike didn't relish what they'd left for him. A hemp rope with a noose in it had been thrown over a stout curtain rod. The noose had been looped around Judge Anselm Alcutt's scrawny neck and he'd been hoisted till his feet suspended eighteen inches off the floor. An oil lamp had been

moved from the judge's table to the seat of one of the chairs, so that the shadow of the hanged man would be cast directly on the window.

The thing that lanced Pike's heart with a sliver of ice was that over Judge Alcutt's head was an old gunny sack!

He was hanged exactly the way they'd hanged Clint Sanger that morning!

They got the body down and took off the sack and the noose. Old Doc Greeby, who was equally at home curing sick mules and ailing men, came in and made an examination. "Hit over the head first," said Doc. "Stunned."

Pike nervously shifted his gunbelt and went through the whole house. But he didn't find a clue. Like Pike himself, Alcutt was a widower and he had lived alone. Marty Mather and Parson Jim were bachelors too. For that matter, two-thirds of the men in town didn't have a woman to souse their clothes for them on washday. Even the pruny old maids didn't stay unmarried long once they arrived in this part of the country.

When Pike returned to the back room he found the two sleek Tullock brothers who ran the mortuary, present and ready to redeem Judge Alcutt's body. Parson Jim Wiggin was there too, his curly head bared, his hands twisting anxiously, his eyes dulled with shock and bewilderment.

The body was carried out to a cart drawn by a black horse. The Tullock brothers were great respecters of mourning.

Gil Tullock drew Pike aside. "You'd better come along to our parlor, sheriff. Something I ought to tell you."

Pike squeezed into the front seat beside the other brother, who didn't do much talking. The body was carried into the parlor and comfortably laid out before the undertaker told Pike anything. Respect for the dead first.

"All right," said Pike, fidgeting with his chins. "What is it?"

Tullock watched his brother move slowly in the other room. "Late this afternoon my brother and I went out to gather in the fruit from that gallows tree."

"Clint Sanger's body," said Pike, more prosaically. "What about it? Don't you think the town's burial fee is big enough?"

Tullock's faint, oily smile rebuked him. "Certainly it is. It's not that at all. Somebody else had already removed the body."

"You're loco as a chinkapin!" Pike's voice was rising in spite of himself. "Who else'd wanna take that thing down? You didn't find the right tree."

"We found the right tree," said Tullock steadily. "The rope was still hanging from the branch, cut off a little above the noose."

"Cut off!"

"I'll show it to you." Tullock reached into a closet and took out a coil of hemp. It looked like the same rope that had been in Pike's hands that morning. The undertaker held up the end that had been slashed through with a sharp knife.

PIKE ran his dotted sleeve across his beaded forehead. "Sanger couldn't have done that himself. His hands were tied behind his back. His boots were on. He was dead when we left him."

Tullock agreed. "No, Sanger couldn't have done it. But a friend of his could. Judge Alcutt's murder looks like vengeance to me. Some more friend's work."

"A friend of his!" snorted Pike. He felt braver when he snorted. "He hasn't got a friend within a hundred miles of this town. Sanger didn't work with a gang. He was a lone coyote."

Tullock glanced sidelong into the next room. "Alcutt's body in place of Sanger's. A bitter exchange, sheriff. A very bitter exchange."

"I'll soon get to the bottom of this!" vowed Pike. He stumbled out, grateful

for the cool night air on his sweating face.

But that was only the start of the terror in Kato Bluff. . . .

In the raw chill darkness before dawn they found Parson Jim Wiggin.

Pike, Mather, and Doc Greeby had been in the jailhouse all night, discussing ways, means, and theories. Nobody had got any sleep. Then at that ungodly hour somebody started to ring the church bell.

It was never rung outside of the regular schedule of church hours except in case of fire or similar catastrophe. Pike's jowls grayed a little as he swung them questioningly from Mather to Greeby, then he hauled open the jail door and peered out into the deserted street.

"Who's making that racket?" he hollered.

The sexton, who had a room in the vestry, darted out in his nightgown and into the dark church. He rushed out again fear-stricken, waving for Pike to come on.

That's how they found Parson Jim hanging from the bell-rope. The bell was still now. The murderer had rustled it to send out his glad tidings to the town. Pike's abundant flesh crept and quivered when he saw the gunny sack over Parson Jim's head.

"It's come," groaned Pike, "it's come!"

The terror had come like an epidemic. And Sheriff Rainey Pike felt absolutely helpless in the face of it.

Later he trudged back. He had done everything he could do. There wasn't a sign that pointed to the killer aside from the method he'd used. The sleek Tullock brothers had gathered the body of the parson unto themselves.

Pike was jaded, his weight hanging on him like lead. He had coffee with a group of determined men in the jail. Then he said, "We've got to sleep." A little warning note signaled in his fagged brain. And he added, "Let's all keep an eye on one another."

WITH a body-shaking jolt, Pike came out of a distorted dream of faceless men. He couldn't open his eyes against the fierce glare of the sun. For a moment he didn't remember where he was, then gradually through his slitted fingers he saw the cell's window bars, yellowed in the strong midmorning light, and he remembered that he'd locked himself in one of the vacant cells.

He heaved himself up to a sitting position on the bunk and ground his knuckles into his eyes. Everything came back to him with a rush, like wind out of a smashed paper bag. Clint Sanger's hanged body missing. Judge Alcutt hanged. Parson Jim hanged. Gunny sacks over their heads.

He shuddered violently, then got up, pawed the cell key out of his pocket, and unlocked his way out.

In his office he found Marty Mather and old Doc Greeby sprawled in chairs like dead men. But both were snoring. The office was a mess with coffee cups, cigar snipes, and cigarette castaways.

Pike shook Mather and Greeby awake. "You two'd better go home to bed where you won't get so kinked up."

They were too drowsy to argue with him and they both shuffled out.

Pike sat there among the dregs of the night before, thinking that he had a lot to do. His head was clearer this morning. The last murder had fused all the suspicions in his mind. These *were* murders for revenge. Someone who had been very close to Sanger was making them all pay for hanging him.

But who?

Nobody would have gone out of his way to spit for Sanger. At least, that had been the general impression. At some time during his life Sanger had turned to a face that they were all familiar with. There had been a contact that none of them knew about yet. Pike had a sudden tremendous yearning to know everything about Sanger's life. There had been quite a bit

of digging back into it both before and during the trial. Pike hadn't read all those records, but they were still at the courthouse.

Pike got up and crisscrossed two gunbelts on his wide hips. He believed in being well-ironed. He put on his big black hat and went out into the street.

The people looked furtive today, watching their neighbors and keeping out of back alleys. Every half-dozenth person he'd pass would ask him if he'd heard anything new on the killings. His stock reply was, "It won't be long now, folks."

He hoped his words gave more confidence then he felt himself.

At the courthouse Pike got elbow-deep in papers covering the known phases of Clint Sanger's life. Sanger had lived a wild, varied existence. He'd apparently tried his hand at anything. Cowpoking in Montana. Prospecting in Colorado. Rodeo work in Texas. Employed in a carnival that ranged out to the Barbary Coast and back. A number of arrests and escapes in widely separated towns.

But nothing to attach him to any certain person in Kato Bluff or the surrounding county.

The harried-looking clerk who'd helped Pike rummage through the papers said, "I understand, sheriff, that the county seat has unearthed some extra stuff. Posters and handbills, things like that."

Pike looked heavily at the floor. "Listen," he said to the clerk. "Close up shop and ride over there for 'em. I can't pass up anything. If I'm not at the jail when you get back, leave 'em."

The clerk nodded. He seemed eager to get out of the stuffy courthouse for the afternoon.

ON THE way back Pike thought of something else. The $14,000 that Sanger had managed to hide so cleverly. It was possible that Sanger had bought a piece of somebody's loyalty in exchange for the secret of the hiding place of the loot. But that didn't make much sense. Even if Sanger had turned the money over to a second person, why should that person remain faithful to a dead felon and continue killing at the risk of drawing fire down on his own head? And to whom could Sanger have given the money? The only visitor he ever had in jail was the lawyer from Twin Forks. And that lawyer was back in Twin Forks.

No, decided Pike, the $14,000 wasn't behind these kills. The real motive was vicious and personal.

Old Doc Greeby was waiting outside the jail.

"Something, Doc?" said Pike.

"I got to thinking about that rope that hung Alcutt and the sack that was over his head—and I come back. I want to see 'em by daylight. Maybe they can be traced." Doc fancied himself as a detective, but he was more of a nuisance.

"They can't," said Pike.

"Let me see 'em," insisted Doc.

He followed Pike into the office. Pike got out his keys and went to a battered rolltop.

"Is that where you keep 'em, Rainey?" said Doc.

"Important stuff is under lock and key." Pike rolled up the top and showed the rope and sack to Doc Greeby.

Doc shook his head over them. "Can't be traced. Too common."

"That's what I said," said Pike.

"That didn't make it right," said Doc peevishly. He went out again.

Pike tossed the rope and sack back into the desk, locked the rolltop, and pocketed the keys. He sat in his worn-smooth chair and started to take cat-naps with one eye open. He was waiting for the courthouse clerk to return. He kept cat-napping.

Night was beginning to spill into the office like an overturned bottle of ink. Someone yelled "Fire!" in a loud echoing voice. Pike bolted up wide awake, his nostrils twitching.

A wisp of smoke trailed out of the

hall from where the cells were. He ran toward the smoke, seeking the fire. The four cells were all empty. Prisoners were scarce in Kato Bluff. The smoke was coming out of one of the vacant cells. Pike slammed open the iron-barred door and discovered that the straw tick on the cell bunk was burning furiously.

No one had been in the jail to set fire to it. Someone must have tossed a lighted match or a burning cigarette in through the window from the outside. Pike cursed the carelessness of some people and dragged the smoke-billowing tick out through the rear door to stamp down the flames in the back yard.

He was smoking as much as the tick when he gave it a final kick and came back inside, carefully locking the rear door behind him. He shuffled back into the office. The darkness had spread from the corners to the middle of the room. He lighted a pair of hurricane lamps and glared at the blank night beyond the windows.

Daytime isn't so bad. You can be brave in the sunlight. It's only when night comes that a nameless atavistic fear begins to seep into you again.

Out there, somewhere, walking in the dread town, was the hangman.

PIKE felt the fine tremor in his knees. Was this the way he reacted to a little exertion, like beating out a fire? He had to chuckle at himself. He was the man in whom the citizens entrusted their safety. He was getting too old for the job. After this term was up, perhaps after this case was over, he'd turn in his star.

He needed something special to fortify him. He looked at the locked desk and thought of the bottle inside that had a warm glow. Rare old Jamaica rum. He'd been saving it for an important occasion. He felt that he wasn't going to have many more memorable dates in his life. Tonight was as good a time as any.

He'd said to Doc Greeby, "Important stuff is under lock and key." He sorted the keys in his fat fingers, snapped back the lock, and heaved up the desktop.

If something had pounced out of the locked desk onto his chest, he wouldn't have stepped back with greater surprise. The coil of hemp and the gunny sack were gone!

Pike snatched the bottle of Jamaica rum, uncorked it, gulped at its throat, then caught his breath. He tried to chase the crickets out of his brain and to think. He *had* put the rope and sack back in there after showing them to Doc Greeby. He *had* locked the desk. No one had come in since then. He hadn't left the office.

The fire! That was the ruse to get him out for a few minutes. A match tossed in from the outside to start the fire. He remembered in a half-nightmare the voice yelling the alarm. While he had run to put out the blaze, the murderer had slipped in from the street, opened the desk, and removed the rope and sack.

Wait a minute! His hands squeezed the bottle-neck. The lock hadn't been forced. It was in perfect condition. Whoever had opened the desk had a key. The only other key to that desk that was in existence was in the possession of Marty Mather, his deputy. Pike's thin breathing wheezed in his throat.

Marty Mather had been another person who'd visited prisoner Clint Sanger. Mather, in his official capacity, brought in the meals, cigarettes, had bantered words with Sanger. Behind Pike's back, it could have been a closer alliance than that. But no. They couldn't have been friends. It was Mather who actually hanged Sanger.

Pike remembered the odd expression on Mather's face yesterday noon when he said "stretch" and it must have reminded Mather of stretching Sanger's neck. Perhaps Mather was savoring the thought. The eager hangman. Suppose Mather had a terrible obsession. He'd hung Sanger with the gunny sack over his head—and now he couldn't stop hanging.

Only it was impossible! Mather had been with Pike for hours before both Alcutt and Parson Jim were found. Pike himself was proof of Mather's innocence.

Pike slowly corked the rum bottle. He felt that the mists of last night's insanity were drifting in again. He knew he had *one* job. Get Mather. He put the bottle back into the desk, but he didn't lock the rolltop. Locking it didn't matter any more.

Blowing out the two lamps, he took a last lingering breath inside before going out on the board sidewalk and locking the jailhouse door. He walked kittywampus across the street to the public stable.

THE big-boned strawberry roan showed its affection, rolling its eyes, flaring its wide nostrils, and skinning its thin lips back from yellow teeth. Pike threw a single-rigged saddle with a dinner-plate horn across the roan's back.

"Marty Mather been in?" he asked the liveryman.

The liveryman was combing witch's bridles out of a buckskin's mane. "Saddled up and lit out a few minutes ago," he said.

Pike rode cautiously down the street. As canny as a sagacious bloodhound, he picked up Mather's trail. "Seen Marty pass by?" he'd ask. The answer would be a nod and the poke of a thumb.

Pike rode out of town into the brush. About a quarter of a mile ahead another horseman was loping along in the veiled moonlight. Pike could tell it was Mather by the way he slumped in the saddle. Where, wondered Pike, does he think he's going in this direction? This led to nowhere.

Taking advantage of all the concealment he could find, Pike kept the same distance behind Mather. He was letting Mather lead him in.

An old abandoned homesteader's soddy broke into view. A dim light glimmered in one of the windows, so it wasn't untenanted. Mather headed straight for it. Pike watched Mather dismount at the door, tie up to a picket pin, and go in.

Pike got out of the saddle where he was, hitched the roan to the gnarled trunk of the honey mesquite they stood under, and went puffing forward on foot. As he got nearer to the sod house he bared one of his revolvers. Then he got down on hands and knees and crept toward the window.

The house suddenly came to life with the roar of a pistol shot!

Pike dropped as flat as he could in the serviceberry shrubs. The house was quiet again. Pike began to doubt that the shot had been meant for him. He hadn't heard the squeal of any bullet.

From beyond the house came a flurry of hoofbeats that soon died out. Pike dared to lift his head, but he saw nothing of the horseman. A long brooding silence followed.

Girding himself for the effort, Pike scurried through the lava dust to the house door, both his guns ready. He kicked the door open, so that it slammed back against the wall. Pike didn't need his guns.

There was a kerosene lamp burning on a rough, dusty table. In the room's only chair sat Marty Mather. His arms were outflung across the table and his head was between his arms. His hat had been blown off. Low at the base of his skull was a raw matted bullet hole. The reek of powdersmoke was everywhere.

Pike stepped hastily around the table toward the back of the house. There he found an open window and outside the tracks of a single horse. Whoever had shot Mather had made his escape that way.

Pike sheathed both guns and cold-footed back to see what he could do for Mather. He couldn't do anything for him. He was sure that Mather had made off with the rope and sack, and he searched the body for them. They had disappeared with the killer. Pike

stood there flat-footed, afraid almost to decide what the next move should be.

He was thinking one dreadful thought: *Of the five men at Clint Sanger's hanging, I'm the only one left alive!* And he knew that his own time was short.

He tried to swallow the parched wad in his mouth and discovered it was his tongue. Dripping sweat, he bolted out of the house and ran all the way to where he'd tied his horse. He galloped the roan back to town. In the street he slowed to a wary walk.

HIS own little wooden house lay comfortably back away from the movement on the main street. A light was lit in the hallway. But though the lighted house looked so inviting, he didn't go in. He bugged his eyes at the shadow of the thing in the entrance. Someone had hung a noose just inside the doorway. His noose. Waiting just for him.

Pike wheeled away blindly and raced for the jail. That was the only place of safety he had left.

Blowing harder than the horse, he spilled out of the saddle, stumbled across the sidewalk, unlocked the door, and pitched in. It seemed an eternity before the lamps would light. Then he stood, breathing heavily, staring at the roll of circulars that had been shoved in through the barred window during his absence.

He picked up the papers and spread them flat on the table. The courthouse clerk had delivered the posters and handbills. Red letters flamed up among Pike's spread chubby fingers:

THE MAN THEY CAN'T HANG

Pike shied back and the Chautauqua poster curled up again. He had glimpsed the secret, but the terror wasn't any less real. Now that he knew the answer, what was he going to do about it? Stay there cowering till the hangman finished off the last one, or go out and face it?

The idea of rounding up a posse bumped through his mind. He shook his head. The hangman was too cunning to try anything unless Pike was alone. Anyway, nobody'd believe Pike if he told them the truth.

He closed up shop for what seemed like the last time. He rode the roan to Mather's house on the outskirts of town. This house was pitch dark. Pike unlimbered both his guns and went in the front door with a desperate carelessness.

Nothing pounced out of the dark at him. He found Mather's living-room lamp and lit it. As the wick burned up, Pike saw what was on the floor in the middle of the room.

It was a heavy, iron-bound chest, caked with clay. Some of the clay looked still moist. It had been buried and recently dug up again. Pike leaned down closer. It was the chest containing the $14,000 that Sanger had taken off the stagecoach. The chest's lock had been twisted and snapped. Pike lifted the lid and looked into it.

Shortly after, Pike came out of the back door of Mather's house. He carried a banjo-shaped shovel in his left hand and dragged the heavy chest with the other. The chest thumped down the two back steps and left a trail in the spud patch as Pike hauled it toward the clump of black willows fifty feet from the house.

He pulled off his coat and dropped it on the ground. He scaled his hat on top of the coat. Folding back his dotted sleeves, he grasped the shovel handle and began to dig energetically in the silty soil.

When the hole was a foot and a half deep, Pike stopped to rest and get his breath. As he leaned on the shovel handle he heard a rustle in the willows and the sweat chilled on him.

He scared up enough courage to look in that direction. A face was coming out of the catkins. A leering, evil, murderous face. *The face of Clint Sanger!*

"Back from the grave," said the hoarse voice.

Pike stood there stiffly. "No, Sanger. You never were in any grave. You might have buffaloed the living daylights outa me, if I hadn't wised up. I know your trick, Sanger!"

Sanger slowly clumped forward until they stood with the chest between them. Pike saw the bulge in Sanger's shirt front and he knew that the rope and gunny sack were close at hand. Sanger was gripping a .44 hogleg in his right hand.

"Unbuckle those gunbelts, Pike, and let 'em drop."

PIKE obeyed and the belts fell down around his feet. Sanger waved him a few paces to one side. Sanger gave the chest a kick. "Burying my swag, I see. Thinking of making the $14,000 all your own, eh? What an honest sheriff this town has," he sneered.

Pike had to keep talking. "You promised to give Mather half if he saved you from hanging. It was too big a temptation for him. After he cut you off the tree, you showed him where you'd hidden the chest. He tried to double-cross you this afternoon by digging it up himself and carrying it to his own house. He still played along with you when you asked him to bring you the rope and sack you were gonna use on me. He stole that stuff outa my desk and went to meet you at the abandoned homesteader's soddy. In the meantime you'd found your chest gone and you wiped Mather out for crossing you."

"Smart," said Sanger. "I knew you'd lead me to it if I waited. The money ain't going to stay here. It goes with me. They'll find you instead, but you won't be able to say much. How'd you know I wasn't dead? I get kinda curious sometimes."

"I saw the carnival posters. At one time you were a circus performer, an acrobat. *The man they can't hang.* You did a lynching stunt. At every performance they put a real noose around your neck and a black hood over your head and strung you up for five or six minutes. When they lowered you again you hadn't suffered as much as a sore throat. It looked like they *couldn't* hang you. What the yokels didn't know is that you had a tooth-bit hidden under the black hood. The tooth-bit is a piece of hard rubber with a metal clip that's inserted between the strands of the rope. A man can't hang by his neck for five minutes, but you can hang that long by your *teeth!*"

Sanger was full of grim humor. "You said a mouthful!"

"You swore you'd split the loot with Mather if he supplied one of those rubber-and-metal clips for you, then concealed it under the gunny sack that was to go over your head at the real hanging. It was all a desperate chance, but it was worth taking. All you had to lose was your life. I lashed the horse from under you and we watched you swing for a minute. After we rode off, you hung there by your teeth as long as you could stand it, then you started swinging back and forth again until you hooked your legs in one of the branches. That relieved the pressure of the rope. Mather went back again as soon as possible yesterday morning and cut you down."

"You talk too much, sheriff. I'm taking the money. But before I go we'll have to find a big tree for you."

Pike screwed his nerve up another inch. "The money ain't in the chest."

Sanger had a snarling laugh. "You fat fraud! Would you come out here and get all lathered up digging a hole for nothing?" He stopped and lifted one end of the chest with his left hand. "It's got weight!"

"Why don't you see for yourself? If you kill me first, you'll never know where I've hidden the bags."

"Why you—" The gun still aimed, Sanger flung up the lid with his left hand and groped with it into the dark chest.

(Continued on page 63)

Bum Steer from Arizona

By Joe Archibald

That fiddlefooted pair, Butterball and Gabby, rode lazily into Brotherly Love. But before they could leave, they had to become Colt crusaders and change the town's name to Bedlam.

BUTTERBALL EPPS, five feet five, and two hundred pounds of non-working cowpuncher, emptied the dregs of a blackened coffeepot into the embers of an early morning fire, and sighed prodigiously. Gabby Snead, who threw a shadow no wider than a snubbing post, eyed his last chunk of chewing tobacco dolefully before cramming it into his mouth. The tall and skinny one winced when cow sound came from somewhere outside the coulee.

"Had the sweetest dream last night, Gabby," Butterball said wistfully. "Dreamed that there was an orchard, the only one in the whole world, where dinero growed on trees, an' I owned it. I was picking me a basket of ten-dollar bills just as I woke up."

"We might as well look things right in the eye," Gabby said. "Got a hundred dollars betwixt us an' work. Only about a month's pay for two cowpokes. We better stop off somewheres an' gather up some moss, huh?"

"With a dream like that," Butterball said, "an' if I'd been Rip Van Winkle, I would of been rich when I woke up twenty years from now. Yep, we better vamoose as that calf over there is bawlin' ag'in. Gives me the creeps."

An hour later the fiddlefooted pair came to a fork in the road where two

hombres were prying an old rotting sign off the trunk of a big tree. They got it loose and tossed it into the ditch, and Butterball leaned far out of the saddle, cocked his head to the side like a parrot, and just made out the weathered letters. They spelled out, *SATAN'S FORKS*. The new sign was being nailed into place and it said, *BROTHERLY LOVE—3 Miles*.

"Why the switch, gents?" Gabby called out, and a little banty with short wiry whiskers spat a nail out from between his teeth and appraised them quizzically.

"Sort of a one-town crusade, stranger," the hombre said. "A era of good feelin' has come to our midst. No more aitch, fire an' brimstone in that community. You happen to be peaceful pilgrims, you will be most welcome there."

Butterball swapped glances with Gabby. Both nodded in the affirmative. "We'll go with you, brethren," the fat waddy said. "Amen."

BROTHERLY LOVE consisted of about forty weather-beaten one- and two-story frame buildings, and the main street was dog-legged. The town was nestled in between a couple of hog-backed ridges and the slope of one of them had nearly been used up for burial purposes. Gabby Snead observed that there were more folk dead than alive in this town.

"Yep, it sure has been a wild an' wicked place," the whiskered native said. "Undertaker was the richest man in town. Left for Cheyenne only this mornin' where he'll retire. Peaceful here, ain't it?"

Butterball and Gabby got off their broncs in front of a false front labeled, *Curly Bill's*. Half a dozen citizens greeted them, including a cross-eyed stubby hombre wearing a bright star, and a tall stony-visaged pious-looking man garbed entirely in rusty black. A big crow was perched on his shoulder.

"Welcome to Brotherly Love," the lawman said. "You just hand over your guns to me pronto. We have cast the devil out of here now an' forever more."

"Yeah verily," a raucous voice said, and Butterball nearly dislocated his jaws when his mouth snapped wide open. "The crow said that, Gabby! I saw—"

"You are right, my friend," the pious one intoned. "I am the Reverend Genesis Judd who aims to purify the hearts of all my brethren in the pay of Tophet! Give unto the sheriff those instruments of iniquity."

"He means six-guns," the lawman said.

Butterball and Gabby co-operated, then strode into the saloon and asked for their favorite brands of nerve stiffener.

"Lemon soda or cherry frostfate—take your pick, gents," Curly Bill said. "An' don't mention such vile brew ag'in!"

"Cripes!" Gabby choked out. "Let's go to the grocery store an' git vanilla extrack!"

Butterball evinced no signs that he had heard. His sharp ears had picked up a conversation going on behind him.

"Yep, hate to part with it, Loopy, but I've got to pay some back taxes on that run-down spread somehow. A Brahma that won a blue-ribbon prize once. I'll let it go for a hundred dollars even. Breaks my heart an'—"

Gabby was alert now. He nudged Butterball. The strangers to Brotherly Love turned away from the bar and approached the three hombres sitting at a table. One was the sheriff.

"Hate to think of it, Hoot. That is the purtiest animal I ever did see. A hundred dollars!"

"Ah—we couldn't help but overhear, my good friends," Gabby said. "Ha, we're both enterprisin' hombres an' don't pass up no bargains when we hears 'em. Maybe we could make a deal, huh?"

"Sit down," the sheriff said. "I'm Loopy Grew. This gent is Hoot Dillock, owner of the Crowfoot out by

Obit Creek. He's my brother-in-law. Tell 'em, Hoot."

"Yep, got a prize Brahma ain't no use to me no more, gents," Dillock said. "The Crowfoot was the most up-an'-comin' cow ranch this side of the Mississippi one time. Had danged bad luck an' now—"

"Let's go and look at the Brahma," Butterball said, all agog.

"Tell you what. Don't want trouble with my pardner out there. I got a hot temper an' might climb him if he puts up a ruckus," Dillock said. "I promised the parson I'd use brotherly love an' don't want to git tempted. I'll sell the Brahma here an' now, an' give you a receipt. You'll go out an' claim the critter. The Reverend Genesis Judd'll tell you it's a beautiful animal. You doubt his word?"

"Let's close the deal, Gabby, huh?" Butterball said. "Who dast cheat nobody in Brotherly Love?"

THE shiftless pair each came up with fifty dollars and handed it to the owner of the Crowfoot. They got a receipt from Hoot Dillock and shook hands all around. Then they went out together to look over the town.

"Got one bank, I see," the fat cowpoke observed. "Huh, them two hombres over in front of the feed store don't look like they loved nobody. I wish I felt happier than I do, li'l partner. You feel anything?"

"Always looking in the tar bucket!" Butterball sniffed. "Look up at the sun, Gabby."

The little banty with the whiskers who'd led them into Brotherly Love came up and said, "Howdy. Quite a town, by Judas. Yep, nobody can kill nobody as the sheriff has his big desk drawer full of the guns the hombres come in with. Was a time only a few days back when there was at least three shootin's between breakfast and dinner. Guess you've noticed all the holes in the buildin's round. Wa'n't made by woodpeckers. Come over an' see me sometime. I'm Stuffy Hicks. A taxerdermist. So long, gents."

"What's one of them—what he said?" Gabby asked the fat waddy as they sauntered across the street.

"Who gives a hoot?" Butterball said and paused in front of the bank. "Huh, assets seven thousand, four hundred an' eight dollars. Er, Gabby, with all them hoglegs locked up, a pair of enterprisin' outlaws could—"

"Butterball Epps!" Gabby snorted indignantly, "Don't you dast get such a notion into your blubbery head again! An' you want us to git locked up an' maybe lynched?"

"I was only supposin', you ol' polecat. Look, we got about seventeen cents in our pokes an' we better git out to that ranch an' git our Brahma an' sell it for a profit quick as we kin!" Butterball advised.

Passing the sheriff's office, they paused to see a little hombre with shifty eyes stomp into Loopy's office. A torrid powwow ensued. "You don't get your shootin' irons back, an' that's final!" the sheriff yelped. "To'd take 'em somewhere else an' shed blood. We figger to bring peace to all the whole world! Now go away an' stop botherin' me."

The visitor to Brotherly Love came out of the office cussing a blue streak. A few minutes later Butterball and Gabby watched him ride out of town with another man.

"An' we've lost our colts, too, Gabby," Butterball groaned, and headed for the tie-rack in front of Curly Bill's. There they met Genesis Judd and the sin-buster said lugubriously, "Peace be with you, Amen."

"Yeah, verily," the crow said.

"We hope so," Gabby sniffed. "That is a smart bird you got, huh?"

"More intelligent than most humans, friend," Genesis said.

"Don't look at me like that!" Gabby said testily, and shivered at the picture the parson made.

On their way out of Brotherly Love, Butterball said, "He reminds me of a hombre I saw once in a mov-

in' pitcher in Butte. It was about a vampire who got out of boot hill at midnight an' walked around until he turned into a big bat. Then he bit folks to keep hisself alive for the next night. Name was Drackler."

"A Brahma," Gabby said excitedly. "They're worth four hundred sometimes. You hang on to that receipt."

"I hate to think sometimes, but I got to," the corpulent rider said. "Assets over seven thousand an' nobody else in Brotherly Love had a hundred smackaroos to buy that Brahma with."

"Will you ever get half bright, Butterball? They are all brothers here an' wouldn't take advantage of each other's hard luck, sabe?" Gabby stopped his bronc to study the scenery. "Yep, there's the dead oak where we turn off. The Crowfoot is four miles from here."

IN DUE time Gabby and Butterball rode down a sloping meadow, across a rotting wooden bridge spanning a slimy watercourse, and into the yard of the Crowfoot. The buildings were sway-backed and peeled of all paint jobs. There was a tired corral fence and a single rooster making its way listlessly across the yard. An hombre came out of the bunkhouse, hitching up his galluses, and luxuriating in a tremendous yawn. And then Butterball Epps saw it. It stood near the Crowfoot apology for a ranch house and it never moved a muscle as it stared out over the yard.

"The Brahma, Gabby! The biggest one I ever—but its hide is peelin' off! One horn is broke an'—an'—"

"It ain't a real one, B-Butterball!" Gabby yelped. "The danged critter is stuffed! We—we been swindled!"

"Howdy, gents. What kin I do for you?" Gabby twisted around in his saddle and looked down at the sleepy-eyed man standing there in run-over boots and wearing a vest that was peeling worse than the Brahma. "I'm Hoot Dillock's pardner, Ossie Neff."

"He sold us a prize Brahma bull!" Butterball Epps choked out, his stomach filled with little winged insects. "That ain't it, is it?"

"Only one we got," Ossie grinned. "The ol' fox! He finally did it! Haw-w-w! You got a receipt?"

"We'll sue!" Butterball yelled in a voice filled with iron filings. "To the full extent of the law! Dillock said it was—er—he said it won a blue ribbon an'—he didn't say it was stuffed! Gabby, we ain't got a leg to stand on!"

"Well, take it away, gents," Ossie said. "I got to go back an' finish my nap. Hoot, that ol' swindler! Haw-w!"

Butterball Epps and Gabby Snead dismounted, stumbled on rubbery legs up the slope to where the Brahma stood.

"Brotherly love," Butterball wailed. "Why that low-down scrawny bunch of crooks, Gabby! It's even full of moths I bet. We was never worse suckers! We was strangers an' they took us in."

"We're ruint, Butterball. We got to find work on a cow ranch. But first, by Godfrey, we'll haul that critter in to Brotherly Love an' dump it right in front of the sin-buster's wikiup! Here's the gold cow of Babylon, we'll yelp. Let the walls come tumblin' down, you miserable sinners!"

While Ossie Neff watched with ill-concealed delight, Butterball and Gabby finally got the stuffed Brahma loaded aboard an old buckboard, the seat of which was missing. Sore in every muscle and every part of their pride and soul, the victims of stark adversity hitched a rope on either side of the wagon and then secured them fast to their saddle horns. They got their broncs moving and towed the defunct bovine away from the Crowfoot. Two miles away they stopped to rest and bemoan the pass they had come to.

"I never thought I'd live to see the day," Gabby Snead griped. "I've heard of bum steers but—let's dump it here an' be on our way to find honest toil."

BUTTERBALL sat his horse, his chin thrust out so far he could never have spit over it. "Nope, we take the critter into Brotherly Love. It might be full of termites an' they'll spread all over the danged town an' the walls will cave in like Babylon. An' maybe that bank—"

"No!" Gabby gulped. "Stop testin' my will power, Butterball. But it'd serve 'em right as they robbed us! We'd just take the hundred. We could perhaps pick up a hogleg somewheres, huh?"

"Let's move on, Brother James," Butterball snapped. "We'll show 'em who'll eat a stuffed—er—I mean crow."

Two miles farther on, at the mouth of a narrow gap, they rested their broncs once more. "They must of stuffed it with oak stumps, Gabby," the fat cowpoke said. "Whew! What in h—"

There was a raucous cry and a beat of wings, and Gabby Snead nearly jumped out of his saddle when the black crow landed on his shoulder. It dug in and would not be shaken loose.

"The sin-buster's crow!" Butterball forced out of a dry throat.

"Yea, verily," the bird said. "Ha-a-lp!"

"Gabby, there's somethin' tied to the crow's leg," Butterball yipped. "Get it off pronto!"

Gabby Snead reached up and took the black bird from his shoulder, and it glared at him with its beady eyes. It took a little tidbit out of Gabby's right ear before he got the little roll of paper off its leg. He threw it into the branches of a pine tree and it squawked, "Run for the storm cellars, gents! The cyclone is here!" then extricated itself and went winging away.

Gabby flattened out the piece of paper that had been torn out of a little memo book, and Butterball nudged his bronc in close and peered over the skinny man's shoulder. He read:

> Help! Outlaws have took the town. All our worldly goods are in the bank's iron safe. We can't get at our guns an' are in deadly peril. Amen. Sinners are waitin' for the Sandy Mush stage to arrive. Packs a thousand dollars for the Fargo Express. Lord Help Us!
>
> GENESIS JUDD

"Hah!" Butterball laughed. "Their sins found 'em out. Let 'em stew in their own juice, the coyotes!"

"Them hombres we saw in town," Gabby said. "Bet they was a outlaw's spies. The ones tried to get their hardware back an'—of all the locoed hombres I ever heard of. With rats all around 'em, they got rid of all the cats! The wrath of the Lord overtook 'em, Butterball."

The fat cowpoke turned and looked at the stuffed Brahma, and a funny look came into his eyes. "After all, ol' pardner, they are our feller men," he opined solemnly. "Forgive us this day our enemies an' our daily bread, the Good Book says. An' there's been times when we've kind of thrown the hooks into unsuspectin' brethren. Yeah, verily."

"Look, you brainless bowl of taller!" Gabby Snead yelled back. "Even if we wanted to help them cusses, you think them outlaws would let us in with some guns even if we knew where to get 'em in the first place? Only one critter in the world can get in an' out of that town. That crow!"

"Igorant men give up easy," Butterball said. "Trouble with you is, you never knowed any hist'ry. Let's leave the Brahma here in the gap, in that bunch of jackpine over there, while we sashay to the nearest cow outfit. Oh, I ain't thinkin' so much of them swindlers as I am of ourselves, Gabby. Gratitude lots of times comes in the shape of greenbacks, yep."

"I ought to know better," Gabby sniffed. "But I'll go along with you, as what kin I lose?"

THEY found the Scab-8 ranch an hour later and told four punchers of Brotherly Love's plight. A big bowlegged man, with red hair and

more freckles than there are scales on a bass, eyed the cowpokes sourly. "That town? What's it good for? You get lemon soda an' a sermon, that's all! An' it sure looks like Blackie Dawson is the owlhoot boss who took over there. An' I don't risk boot hill for Brotherly Love as Blackie shoots first an' then says how mighty sorry he was afterwards. You better find a sheriff's posse somewheres."

"Look," Butterball snapped. "All me an' my partner wants is three or four six-guns an' a couple Winches. I got a solid gold ring of the Royal Order of the Purple Moose with a chip diamond in it for security. Seein' as nobody else has nerve enough to save the town, why not let two real he-men try?"

The Scab-8 punchers roared. "An' where is them two curly wolves, hah? Awright, it's a deal. I figger we can round up some shootin' irons, my li'l fat friend. An' gimme that lodge ring! You fork some collat'ral over too, Skinny!"

"My grandpa's solid gold huntin' case watch," Gabby Snead said dolefully as he handed it over. "Everywhere we get robbed. Ain't no civil pride nowheres nowadays."

A few minutes later the punchers were riding at a fast clip back to the gap where they'd cached the stuffed Brahma.

"Awright, how we goin' to git these guns in to Brotherly Love, Butterball?" Gabby wanted to know. "Whistle for the crow to come out an' tie 'em to his laigs?"

"I shall depend on the curiosity of the human race includin' ones like Blackie Dawson," Butterball yelled. "How many times does a gent see a big stuffed Brahma towed in on a old buckboard by a pair of riders? I am slittin' open the critter an' hidin' the shootin' irons in it. Let's hope an' pray the stage ain't in 'fore we get there."

In the gap, Butterball took out a jackknife an' stabbed the stuffed bull in the region of the brisket and made a slit, two feet long, in the rotting hide. He pulled some stuffing out of it and then put two Winches and three six-guns inside. "Some tree branches'll plug up the hole, Gabby. Cut some."

"I'll be ding-danged," Gabby Snead said. "Li'l pardner, you got a little more sense than your bronc after all! But them owlhoots ain't goin' to leave nobody unguarded, huh?"

"Only one thing I ask, Gabby, an' that is that Blackie or none of his coyotes ever read hist'ry. There is a chance that it might repeat like onions after you eat too many, yep. Well, let's be hitchin' the ropes to the buckboard an' pilgrimin' on."

It was an hour before dusk when Butterball and Gabby Snead were ordered to freeze in their saddles at the edge of Brotherly Love. Toward them came a pair of the meanest-looking cusses the cowpokes had ever had the misfortune to meet.

"Nope, they ain't got no hoglegs," the taller of the badmen said, and lowered his Winch. "What in the name of Tophet you hombres got there?"

"We are poor but honest ranchers," Butterball said plaintively. "This was a dear ol' Brahma got pneumonia an' died an' we had it stuffed we loved him so dearly. Only taxerdermist in the country lives here in town, by name of Stuffy Hicks. Our Brahma needs fixin' an'—"

The owlhooters looked at each other. They exchanged nods. "Loco as sheepherders, Yuma," the bearded one grinned. "They ought to be put outa their misery. Awright, get off them broncs as we aim to frisk the both of you roosters!"

SWIFTLY the badmen searched Butterball and Gabby high and low and went through their saddle blankets and warbags. The outlaw called Yuma snapped, "Go on in to town, whack-ears! That stage ought to be pullin' soon, Wolf!"

The citizens of Brotherly Love, in-

cluding a dour-faced parson and sheriff, stood on the walk in front of Curly Bill's and watched Butterball and Gabby pull the buckboard past. Two owlhoots stood near the group, their six-guns alerted.

"That crow looks scairt, too," Gabby growled. "Wonderful how it remembered me, huh?"

"Ever look at your beak in the mirror?" Butterball sniffed. "You are one of its next of skin. Let's dump this Brahma by the ol' barn in back of the livery stable, Gabby. It's a likely place."

A tall badman with a shoestring black mustache took his stand near the barn while the fiddlefeet dragged the stuffed Brahma off the buckboard. "I bet if you idjuts was hens you'd lay cracked eggs," he mocked. "Ha-a-a!"

"Didn't you ever have a pet you loved, huh?" Butterball asked in a hurt voice. "A grizzly bear, a timber wolf, or a sidewinder? Nope, you ain't got no sediment. Come on, Gabby. Let's get some lemon soda."

They joined the other citizens of Brotherly Love in front of Curly Bill's. "It was just a joke, gents," Genesis Judd said. "We would of give your money back."

"I ain't sayin' you ain't honest, Parson," Butterball sniffed. "But if I was a fat chicken an' you was a fox, I'd sure roost high. They rob the bank?"

"Got the whole eleven hundred," the sheriff gulped. "Ha, our ashets were a li'l inflated on the winder. Now they're waitin' for the Fargo strongbox. You an' your brotherly love, Genesis! We're ruint! We're bankruptured!"

"My crow found you awright," Genesis mumbled. "You bring—"

"Sh-h-h!" Loopy Grew hissed, and out of the saloon came Blackie Dawson, spraying lemon soda from his whiskers. He was worse than Butterball and Gabby had imagined, and they shook with ague when he cut loose. "No redeye in this mangy town? Just for that I'll set fire to the whole kaboodle before I pilgrim! I'll shoot it up, too! Lemon soda, pf-t-t!"

"Ever see anythin' uglier that don't live under a rotten log, Gabby?" Butterball whispered. "If I just didn't hear him talk, I'd of swore he was not of the genius homer. Two Colts an' a bowie knife, ugh!"

"If you got anythin' to say, Fatty," Blackie quickly howled, "say it out loud while I'm in this town, sabe?" He drew a gun and fired and Butterball leaped a foot off the walk. One of the splinters bit at Gabby's leg and another brought a painful yelp out of Genesis Judd.

"An' don't get underfoot when the stage comes in, you dogies!" Blackie laughed. "Don't want to have to kill too many at once!" He strutted away on his big bowed legs and banged through the screen door of the Paradox Lunch. His voice carried like the echo of a heavy landslide as he gave his order. "A whole leg of lamb, hash-slinger! An' that pan of bread puddin', sabe? Every fly I find in it you lose one of your toes!"

"Let us pray," Genesis Judd intoned as he led his flock into Curly Bill's. Blackie's guard followed, a Winch cradled in his arms, and Butterball and Gabby knew there could be no talking here.

"Awright, pardner," the rotund cowpoke said. "We better get hold of Stuffy Hicks an' then we'll drag that Brahma inside the barn. Looks like rain might come 'fore mornin'. Stuffy kin give us a estimate on the repair job."

THE owlhooter grinned nastily at Genesis Judd. "Hope that crow ain't too tough, you sin-buster, as Blackie says he's goin' to make you eat it 'fore he leaves town! That hombre is sure full of fun."

"Come on, Butterball," Gabby said under his breath. "Let's go out an' get shot."

The waddies, conscious of the close scrutiny of Blackie's deployed spooks,

went to Stuffy Hicks's little shop next to the express office. Stuffy was sitting next to a stuffed coyote and was gnawing his nails. "H-howdy, boys," he choked out. "Tight spot, ain't it? What in aitch did you bring that ol' Brahma in here for?"

"You handy with a Winch, Stuffy?" Butterball asked, keeping his voice low.

"If I had one now, I couldn't miss a baby chipmunk's eye at a hundred yards!" the taxidermist said. "I sure would love to stuff that outlaw an' put him in my winder."

"Just follow us, Stuffy," Butterball said. "Want some help draggin' the Brahma in under cover. The badmen think me an' Gabby here are loco like sun-struck loons."

"Awright, but it's sure Greek to me," Stuffy grunted.

"You studied hist'ry one time, too, huh?" the fat puncher observed.

"Huh?" Stuffy asked.

"Forget it, an' come on," Butterball snapped. "It is just dark enough."

A few minutes later one of Blackie's gunnies stood and watched the three men drag the Brahma into the old barn. Stuffy Hicks fell right into his role as if he'd rehearsed it for a week. "Lotta holes in this critter, gents. Needs a new horn an' some hide slickener. I'd say it'd cost—let's see now—"

Blackie Dawson's guard sauntered out, took his stand against the fence of a little lumber yard twenty yards away.

Butterball whispered, "Awright, dig out the shootin' irons, pronto! Stuffy, you hide them on you where they won't show an' get them to the boys at Curly Bill's. Me an' my pardner will get on the roof of the hardware store, which is the highest spot in Brotherly Love, an' pick off some polecats. Here's your Winch, Gabby. First target is that spook outside."

Stuffy Hicks's boots were two sizes too big for him anyway and had ample room to cache hardware. He dropped the third six-gun down his shirt, buttoned his vest, and strolled away. "Yep, that's final, gents. Estimate is eighty-five dollars, so take it or leave it!"

"You're a robber!" Gabby yelled, then edged to the door and looked out. He gave Stuffy Hicks plenty of time to get to Curly Bill's before unlimbering the artillery.

"Listen!" Butterball suddenly said under his breath. "I think the stage is comin', Gabby. Let's stir our stumps! Good luck, pardner!"

GABBY SNEAD went out of the barn and snapped a shot at the spook over by the lumberyard. The outlaw howled with pain and stark surprise and bit the dust. Butterball and Gabby raced across the alleyway, went up a flight of rickety stairs strung against the boxlike building, and reached the roof. They crouched down near a brick chimney just as gunfire cut loose at Curly Bill's. Above the racket sounded Blackie Dawson's bovine roar. Four owlhooters charged the saloon.

"Awright, Butterball!" Gabby yelped. "Let 'em have it!" His shot blazed across the seat of an outlaw's pants and burned more than cloth. The spook jumped high, howling like a drunken Comanche.

Butterball knocked his man down and then swung the Winch toward Blackie Dawson, who was working his way along the walk not ten feet away from Curly Bill's door. *Crack!* The outlaw roared like a grizzly bear and fell on his face. Up he came, dragging one leg, and then he dove right through the window of the Chinese laundry, taking the sash with him.

Bang! Crack! Bang! This was Bedlam, not Brotherly Love. A bullet whisked through the crown of Butterball's hat and missed his cranium by the width of a potato chip. "Sure'll be a permanent partin' there!" the fat man yipped and let go at a spook trying for the broncs at the tie-rack. "Mark up another, Gabby, by gad-

frey! Here comes the stage an' them fellers on the seat are blazin' away, too!"

"Got to reload," Gabby said, flat against the roof. "Get that varmint shootin' from the top of the Ajax Hotel, will you?"

Butterball did. The spook turned a cartwheel off the roof of the building a hundred yards away and dropped twenty feet into a big rain barrel. And when the fat cowpoke saw Blackie Dawson crawling out of the laundry and making a try for his bronc, he turned the last shell in his W i n c h loose. Splinters showered Blackie and he got to his one good leg and kept trying.

Butterball said, "My Winch is empty, Gabby. Take up where I left off. Have fun with the curly wolf!"

Gabby did. He shot the other leg out from under Blackie Dawson, and the dread outlaw's frustrated roar sent echoes booming out toward the hills. There was a fluttering of wings and Butterball twisted around to see the crow perched on the chimney. "Caw-w-w!" it squawked. "Yeah, verily!"

"As good a dove of peace as we kin get on short notice, Butterball," Gabby said. "The shootin's over an' not one spook got out of town."

Butterball and Gabby made their way down the rickety stairs and out of the alleyway, then strolled triumphantly toward Curly Bill's. Out of the saloon came Genesis Judd, Loopy Grew, and six other natives of Brotherly Love.

"Put 'er there, you danged smoke-eaters!" the lawman yelped, and stuck out his hand.

"Blessings on thee," the sin-buster invoked. "You are faithful crusaders!"

"Wa'n't nothin'!" Butterball said modestly, and took a look around. The front of Curly Bill's was well ventilated and lemon soda trickled out of the saloon and dripped into the gutter. Not more than twenty feet away, volunteer scavengers were piling the defunct outlaws into one heap for disposal in boot hill. Blackie Dawson and two survivors were sprawled out near the tie-rack begging for first aid. Blackie also wanted to know how in blankety-blank he'd overlooked the Winches and six-guns.

"Guess you never studied hist'ry!" Butterball mocked. "You git the bank money off him, Loopy?"

The sheriff nodded. "An' you jiggers also saved the Fargo strongbox, too. An' after what we did to you fellers! Well, anythin' you want just ask for it!"

"Kind of thirsty," Gabby said. "The lemon soda was all shot up an'—"

Genesis Judd said, "I will make a dispensation for the nonce, brethren. I shall instruct Curly Bill to bring up from his cellar certain beverages I will not name right out. I believe a celebration of the deliverance of our fair community is in order. Amen."

HOOT DILLOCK, a bullet burn listing him slightly to starboard, shuffled up and thrust a roll of bills into Butterball's hand. "My deepest apologies, gents. I was a desperate man."

"Well, thanks!" the fat cowpoke grinned, and then everybody went into Curly Bill's for the real McCoy.

When the spirits flowed freely, Genesis Judd asked for s i l e n c e. "Brethren, we shall hear how these two hombres wiped out Blackie Dawson and his miserable sinners!" He nodded to Butterball.

"Just hist'ry repeatin' i t s e l f, gents," Butterball orated. "Once there was a town full of hombres called Trojans, an' a big bunch of Greeks tried to take over the place. But they couldn't get in 'cause the Trojans had a big stone wall built all around. Then the Greeks powwowed an' decided to build a big wooden bronc. Took 'em a few days. Then after they finished it, they retreated back to potholes as if they'd given up attackin'.

"The Trojans laffed an' went out an' got the wooden bronc for a prize an' hauled it in to town. Durin' the night, a bunch of Greeks that was hid inside snuck out an' opened the gates. In swarms the Greeks an' wins the range war. It is why you hear gents say nowadays never to look a Greek gift bronc in the mouth."

"I'll be a wall-eyed piker!" the sheriff said. "Edjication is a wonderful thing, I heard. This proves it, huh?"

"Instead of a wooden bronc it was a stuffed Brahma," Gabby said, and gazed lovingly at his fat partner.

"Let's see now," Loopy Grew said. "There's five hundred reward for the capture of Blackie Dawson. Take you hombres a week or two to collect at Amen Creek, the county seat, so what do you gents say we take up a collection for our heroes, huh? Parson, you pass the hat around?"

"Wouldn't think of it, friends," Butterball protested, and Gabby stepped down hard on his foot.

"A fine way to act, you ungrateful walking mushmelon. Of course we'll except your kind offer, folks!"

Genesis Judd walked up and down Brotherly Love's dog-legged street and solicited every taxpayer in sight. When he finally dumped the contents of his stovepipe hat onto the bar in Curly Bill's and counted, he announced that Butterball Epps and Gabby Snead were richer by seventy-nine dollars and eleven cents, and two pants buttons.

"Can use them, too," Gabby grinned. "An owlhooter shot one of mine off awhile ago. Well, if me an' my pardner could have our hoglegs, Loopy, we'll be on our way. Don't always happen on such peaceful towns as this, nope."

"I greatly fear," Genesis said ruefully, "that we are not quite ready here to turn the other cheek after being smitten on the first one. And of course we shall have to change the name of the town once more. Who has a suggestion?"

"I have," Butterball grinned. "Troy, Arizona. Let us pilgrim, Gabby. We'll send you a post card from Amen Creek when we get our reward."

"If you hombres ever come back this way," Stuffy Hicks said, "you'll see that Brahma all slicked up an' standin' at the entrance to Troy. *Adios*, you gun-fannin' Greeks."

"We'll take them Winches an hoglegs," Butterball said. "We give the Scab-8 rannies collat'ral for 'em. Then we'll be on our way, kind friends."

The Trojans cheered as Butterball and Gabby headed for the wide-open spaces. Genesis Judd afforded them a benediction and the crow cawed its farewell. At midnight, under the stars, the fiddlefeet made a warm camp and spread their soogans.

"I still feel guilty about takin' them alms," Butterball offered as he poked sizzling bacon with a stick.

"How'd we ever of got our watch an' lodge ring back if we didn't, huh?" Gabby snorted. "If anybody finds me without my six-gun ag'in, I won't be breathin'!"

"I bet it ain't easy gettin' to be so dumb as you are, Gabby," Butterball sighed. "But let's practice brotherly love, huh? We sure got somethin' to crow about."

"That ain't no bull, partner," Gabby grinned. "Pass the coffee."

Mustang Musketeer

SPRING fog, thick as quilted muslin, was rolling in across the Los Angeles plains when the Mexicano came into camp. To Sam Brennan, trail boss for the Keyhole horse outfit, the stranger from south of the border wasn't much to worry about. At first, that is.

It was the fog that was giving Sam his main concern. That, and the two

Only after his siesta could the camp cook dish out a .45 fiesta.

By Steve Hail

hundred odd head of California mustangs and half-breed Morgans that he was scheduled to start east on the overland route just two days hence. By this time, Sam supposed, they were scattered from hell to breakfast. Well, anyway, Santa Ana, which was plenty far enough.

He sucked coffee from his struggling mustache and stood up for the tenth time since daylight, trying to penetrate the milky murk hemming in the camp wagon. It looked hopeless. A man couldn't see the ground from the saddle, much less a skitterish horse at roping distance.

He said, "Hell," disgustedly and sat down again, bracing his bony shoulders against a nigh wheel. He told Ed Singleton, one of the three trail herders hunkered silently around the fire, "Pass the coffee," then settled down resignedly to wait it out.

That's when he heard the cautious footsteps shuffling up the back trail from town. On the far side of the fire, Bautista, the quarter-breed Navajo, raised an eyebrow and pushed himself to his feet.

"Maybe t'ief," the breed grunted and slid his hand gun from its holster.

Sam nodded and got up and reached in behind the endgate and drew the Winchester carbine from its scabbard. He jacked a shell into the chamber and thumbed back the hammer. The resulting click, magnified by the damp air, sounded through the silence like a shod hoof striking bedrock. It made for satisfying results. The footsteps stopped.

Sam cradled the carbine in both hands and said, "Reach high an' come in a-walkin'."

THE steps began again, slower now, and presently the stranger loomed out of the mists, hands high, head down, following the wheel tracks like a beagle on the hot scent of bear. Once inside the fuzzy circle of light that had been burned away by the heat of the cookfire, he stopped and blinked benevolently at the tensed riders.

Sam looked him over, from the toes of his bare feet to the tattered crown of his straw sombrero. He was built like a tallow barrel, Sam saw now, only with legs—and these didn't seem to do much toward keeping him clear of the ground. He stood about wagon wheel high and nearly as big around.

Sam's jaw sagged. So did his gun.

From his place near the hind wheel, Joe Hammerling, the fourth man of the group, laughed relievedly.

The stranger's round face split in an answering smile. From ear to ear it was, and canyon deep. The thin mustaches drooping down his fat cheeks did little to lessen his appearance of an outsized cherub. He evidently took the graying hair at Sam Brennan's temples to be a symbol of authority, for he said, *"Buenos dias,* señor boss. My name she is Jiminez Sorrento Sanchez de la Cruz. You need the *vaquero,* no?"

Sam looked at the round body, all two hundred pounds of it, then he thought of the half-wild mustangs and the two thousand miles of trail ahead of them. He snorted and said, "We need the *vaquero,* hell no!"

The Mexican's eyes clouded. "But in the hacienda of the City of Angels I hear that you go to Omaha. It is there that Jiminez have the oncle who have promise him the job. So it is there I must go, *es verdad?"*

As simple as that, Sam thought. "Look," he said, bearing down hard on the sarcasm. "*Es verdad* or not, mustangs ain't blue grass thoroughbreds. They don't bring much on the market. What with losses along the way, and paying the boys here, I'm lucky to make tobacco money out of the deal. I ain't puttin' on no more riders, much less a walkin' lager barrel. Not only that, I—"

The stranger ignored the intended insult. He interrupted with, "You say hire, señor boss? But it is not pay that Jiminez is ask. It is, how you say, the work-the-way, no?"

"H-m'm," Sam said. He pulled thoughtfully at his mustache, recalling the rumors of Mojaves lately broken free of Army restraint and reported to be haunting the trail like avenging devils. They *could* use an extra hand all right. And the financial arrangement was certainly hard to beat. A work-a-way. "H-m'm," he said again. "Well—"

He looked at the other doubtfully. "I dunno about that *vaquero* stuff. You might be all right on a buffalo, but on these half-pint mustangs I'm afraid you'd have most of 'em swaybacked afore we reached Salt Lake City. What else can you do. You shoe horses?"

"But no," the Mexican said sadly. "I am the—" Then his face brightened. "What can Jiminez do, you ask? He make the best tequila in Sonora, he seeng the finest baritone in three provinces, with the señorita he make love with the guitar, his enchiladas tney—"

"Wait," Sam said. "You a cook? This thing was beginning to shape up into a real deal. The way it was now, all four of them had to take their turn at driving the wagon and cooking. With somebody to take over that chore it would leave the odd man free to help ride herd. It looked good. And at the wages the other was asking, which was nothing, Sam didn't see how he could lose. "All right," he said in sudden decision. "You're hired. Now what was the name again?"

The Keyhole's new cook drew himself up. "Jiminez Sorrento Sanchez de—"

"Hold it," Sam said. He shook his head. "No good. Suppose we need you in a hurry sometime. Like if we're havin' Injun trouble, for instance?" He grinned, picturing the help the Mexican would be if things ever got around to a real fight. "Jimmy Sanchez'll have to do," he went on. "Now things ought to be clearin' up around here in an hour or two and we'll be pretty busy.

"Tell you what you do, Jimmy. You can save me a trip to town. You hitch up and drive in and load up the supplies. Pasquale's Mercantile on Spring Street has got 'em ready. And never mind that tamale stuff. Just pick up the flour and sowbelly and beans that I ordered. Be back here tomorrow morning. With luck we ought to be ready to start by then. Sabe?"

JIMMY'S cheeks glowed. He hitched at the frayed rope holding up his tarpaulin-sized pants and said, "The mistake you no make, señor boss. In Sonora, Jimmy he make the—"

"Never mind all that," Sam said shortly. "This is California. Just be here tomorrow."

Jimmy grinned happily and began an inventory of the wagon's meager cooking equipment.

It was almost noon before the sun blotted up the fog. The riders saddled up and started on the trail of the scattered remuda. As they rode away from the camp, Sam looked back over his shoulder to where Jimmy was driving the wagon down the back trail to town. From a distance he looked like a bullfrog on a lily pad. A very small lily pad.

Ed Singleton said dourly, "Sam, you're makin' a mistake. Them Mexicanos are critters of habit. They don't never learn. We're goin' to have trouble."

"I recall a gen'ral sayin' a army travels on its stomach," Sam said, brushing aside the other's prediction. "That goes for hoss trailers, too. After eatin' your cooking last time east, I know Jimmy can't be no worse. This is going to be a fine trip."

Jimmy's first meal proved the trail boss a prophet. They were longer than expected in rounding up the herd, so it was near sundown of the next day before they straggled into camp. They were weary, saddle sore, and hungry. Mostly hungry, after the night and day of cold bread and bacon carried in their pockets. As they came over a rise above the camp, they saw that Jimmy had returned and had things well in hand. A pot was boiling busily

over the fire. The aroma told them it wasn't beans.

Sam, in the lead, saw a crate of chickens lashed to the tailgate. Several of the same, deceased, were simmering tantalizingly in a sauce of tomatoes and fragrant herbs. Then there was . . . But the riders didn't wait. They descended on the wagon at full gallop. It didn't take them long to fill their plates.

After that, for a long time, there were no sounds except scrapings, gulpings, and contented belches. At last, Sam Brennan staggered to his feet, pushing his scoured plate regretfully aside. Even the Halper House in Omaha, he remembered, couldn't put out that kind of chow.

Ed Singleton grunted to his feet, a cup of rich, steaming coffee in his horny fist.

"Well," Sam said complacently. "Can I hire 'em, or can't I?"

Singleton strained the coffee noisily but delicately through his beard. "The Mex," he admitted grudgingly, "is a jool." He shook his head wonderingly.

Jimmy Sanchez came around from the far side of the fire, wiping his hands on his pants. Sam told him, "That was good, Jimmy. *Muy bueno.*"

Jimmy beamed, showing the gold fillings in his back molars. "In Sonora," he said modestly, "I have learn many things. I have—"

"Never mind," Sam interrupted. He let out a notch in his belt and patted his stomach. "For me, this is enough." He punched Jimmy affectionately on the shoulder and went to get his bedroll from the wagon. That meal was going to take some sleeping off.

BY THE time daylight was spilling in over the Sierras the next morning, Sam had the drive settled down and pointed east. For two days thereafter the fog held on, not thick enough to hinder work, but holding high, hiding the sun and bringing with it an unaccustomed chill. The remuda made good time in spite of the riders' difficulty of holding the herd together.

The morning of the third day found them winding down the trail on the eastern slope of Cajon Pass, heading for the Arizona border. Sam Brennan felt good. The danger of horse thieves lay behind, the dry desert marches and the chance of meeting up with raiding Mojaves at least several days ahead of them. And Jimmy's food had improved, if such a thing were possible, even under the disadvantage of moving camp each day. Even the sun was shining, for a change.

It was after one of their midday halts that, for the first time, Sam sensed something wrong. Riding back from the point he found that Ed Singleton, whose turn it was to ride drag, was missing. So was the wagon, usually trailing along in the settling dust of the passing herd. Sam's forehead wrinkled. He called out to Bautista and Hammerling to keep the bunch moving, then he spurred back toward the noontime stopping place to see what was holding Jimmy up.

As he topped the crest of a knoll he saw the wagon below him. It was still anchored at the scene of the midday camp. The team was unhitched and grazing contentedly alongside the trail. The wagon looked strangely permanent. A canvas shelter had been attached to one of the sideboards, its farther edge lashed to stakes, making a tentlike affair of the whole. Besides the wagon, Jimmy and Ed Singleton were arguing violently.

Sam roweled his bald-faced mare and rode up in time to hear Jimmy shouting, *Santiago santissima!* What makes, this?" His stubby legs were spread wide and a carving knife in his fist was glinting lethally in the sun.

Singleton, Sam saw, wasn't having too much trouble avoiding the knife, but his face was as dark as a thundercloud and his sleeves were rolled up, ready for business.

Sam slid out of the saddle. "All right," he said, hurrying up. "What goes here?"

Jimmy's white teeth flashed. "Señor boss," he said, waving a hand at

the shelter he had rigged. "The siesta, she is interrup'—she is espoil. Jimmy Sanchez, he cannot make—"

Singleton said, "I kep' looking back, wondering what was holding him up. Finally I rode on back an' there he was. Sound asleep! I booted him in his fat haunches and he goes for the knife. Just lemme alone with him another minute, Sam."

SAM held up his hand. "Wait a minute." He turned to the cook. "Ed is right, Jimmy. You can't hold up the drive just to sleep. We got to keep going. And lay off that knife business. A man don't take to killing just because his sleep is disturbed."

"Jimmy Sanchez, he must have the siesta," the cook said with great dignity. "Every day when the sun she is shine, my countrymen have the siesta. It is the custom. It is the matter sad when the sleep she is disturb. In Sonora—"

"This isn't Sonora," Sam said, a little irritably. "We can't have anyone lagging behind. You'll have to do your sleeping at night."

"At night? But of course! But it is not the same. One must sleep in the sun when the meal she is finish. Ever since Jimmy is *muchacho* in Sonora he make the siesta."

"Jimmy," Sam said firmly, "that's out. It's got to stop. Within a few days we'll be getting into Mojave country. We've got to keep the outfit closed up at all times. Now, hitch up and get started."

Jimmy drew himself up straight, pulling his stomach into his chest. His pants slipped at the unaccustomed posture, but he managed to catch them in time. He didn't even smile. "This make Jimmy very unhappy," he said. "*Muy, muy* unhappy. It is perhaps that Jimmy Sanchez cannot make like the *artista* with the pot and the pan without the siesta."

"All right, all right," Sam snapped. "But hitch up and get movin'! I've had enough of this." He shot a warning look at Singleton, then climbed into the saddle and started forward to catch up with the drive.

When they stopped that evening, Sam noticed with satisfaction that the camp wagon was right on the heels of the last straggling mustang. Jimmy Sanchez had lost no time. Nor was he slow about unhitching and setting up his kitchen. But he didn't waste any time cooking, either. Supper was ready almost before the men were unsaddled. And what a supper.

There were boiled beans, burnt, and smelling hideously of something that was impossible to identify. If Jimmy hadn't been barefooted ever since he'd joined the outfit, Sam would have suspected the addition of soiled socks to the pot. Besides the beans there were cold bread left over from breakfast, and a vile, yellow-colored liquid that was supposed to be coffee. Sam tasted it, glanced suspiciously at the muddy stream near by, and spat it out.

"Now, look," he began heatedly, addressing the cook. Ther he stopped, shrugging. After all, he could be just as stubborn as Jimmy. Then, too, the food couldn't get any worse, that was a cinch. Given a day or two, Jimmy would in all likelihood forget his imagined affront and come around. Sam turned in early, the growling of his empty stomach accompanying his snores.

BUT he was wrong about Jimmy Sanchez. The cook's attitude remained cold and disinterested. And the food, Sam discovered, could get worse, and did. The next morning they didn't even have sourdough bread. They had pancakes. Flour and water pancakes. The meal was a silent, unsociable affair. Afterward, the riders took up several notches in their belts and rode off. This time it wasn't only their stomachs that were grumbling.

The starvation diet began to pay off, only in reverse. It had a demoralizing effect on everyone. Joe Hammerling, usually a tophand with horses, was the first to suffer. He was riding a half-broken bay when he noticed the cinch

creeping too far back for safety. He dismounted to tighten up and the animal snorted, jumped sideways, and snapped the reins in his hands. The bronc took off through the sagebrush like a flushed rabbit, trailing the saddle at his heels.

Sam Brennan spurred off in pursuit. He managed to run the horse down finally, and got a rope on him, but the saddle was practically demolished. Sam picked up the pieces and rode back to where Hammerling was standing beside the trail, cursing bitterly at his hat which he had thrown to the ground. Nobody said very much.

Then the next night while riding night herd, the breed, Bautista, saw what he thought was a marauding bear strayed down from the hills. He took a shot at it. It wasn't a bear, but the shot did almost as much damage. It started the horses. Sam awakened to the shouted cry, "Stampede!"

The men got out of their blankets just in time to head off the herd from running over the camp. They were the whole night and more rounding the strays up again.

Nobody got any sleep. Except Jimmy, that is. The stampede hadn't even caused him to open an eye. He was snoring peacefully when, in the hard light of midmorning, Sam trailed wearily, and hungrily, back to the wagon. The trail boss stirred the smoldering fire gently with his foot. He stirred the slumbering Mexicano with his other foot, not so gently. Also, he kept one hand on the butt of his gun, just in case.

But Jimmy only yawned and sat up. "Excuse it that I make the ho and the hum," he said apologetically. "The night she is not so long for the *bueño* sleep. A man must the siesta have for to—"

Sam Brennan fought back the urge to kick the other in the teeth. "All right," he said, swallowing his pride, "you win. Now, here's what we'll do. As I said before, we're on the edge of Indian country and I can't have the wagon trailing too far behind, but you can clear a space in the back, under the cover, for your siesta. I'll have the boys take turns driving for an hour or two every afternoon after lunch. That way you can sleep while on the move. It is good, *sí?*"

Jimmy glowed. "It is good, señor boss," he agreed happily. "This I have never try, but I will—how you say—give him the go, no? Now, if you will excuse, Jimmy will make with the pot and the pan."

JIMMY SANCHEZ did just that. There was coffee, miraculously brown and rich again. And biscuits as light as a summer cloud. The crowning achievement was an omelette made from eggs that had somehow managed to survive the jolting of the springless wagon. They must have been a little musty after the days on the trail, but Jimmy disguised them with a thick sauce of tomatoes and peppers and onions. It was food for royalty.

When the hands finally settled back, sighing, Sam figured he'd better strike while the iron was hot, or rather the omelette. He told them about the arrangement he had made with Jimmy.

Ed Singleton was the first to object. He wiped egg from his beard and said, "Any time I start wet-nursing a fat slob of a cook, you'll know it. And it ain't going to be now. That's that!"

"Maybe you like pancakes," Sam said acidly. "I don't. Anyway flour and water, mostly water, pancakes."

Singleton shuddered. "Well—" he said, weakening.

Sam followed up his advantage. "I'll take my turn with the rest of you," he offered magnanimously. "Anything's better than starving, or dying of toemaine. Is it a go?"

Everybody agreed, reluctantly, that the arrangement was the lesser of two evils. Sam had them draw straws for the first day's haul. Joe Hammerling won. Or lost, however you wanted to look at it. The rest of the riders got the herd moving.

It went that way for several days.

After the noonday meal, when Jimmy had cleared away his pots and pans, he climbed into the back of the wagon, wedged his bulk into the angle of the endgate and promptly went to sleep. How anybody could rest, much less sleep, while the wagon lurched and bumped over the ungraded trail, Sam could never understand.

But the cook, it appeared, could slumber through anything slightly less eruptive than a live volcano. He did grumble about its not being the true siesta and that it caused troubled dreams, but his meals thenceforward proved that he was at least partly satisfied. And the riders reacted accordingly. On more than one occasion Sam had to warn them about driving the outfit too hard. He wanted meat on the horses bones, he told them with a grin, when they got to Omaha.

Then one afternoon right after the midday halt, and with Jimmy snoring contentedly in the back of the wagon, Bautista galloped back from the point to inform Sam that he had cut the trail of unshod ponies heading directly toward them. Then the trace had cut off sharply to the north, the breed said. He handed over a worn piece of leather from a torn moccasin and said, "Mojave."

Sam, on the wagon seat, shifted the reins to one hand and examined the fragment, turning it slowly in his hand. "They've seen us, of course," he said at last. "That's why they turned aside."

He thought rapidly, weighing the circumstances, picturing the trail ahead. "There's a trading post at Bitter Springs," he said, thinking aloud. "It's about seventy miles ahead. A two-day drive. We'd prob'ly be safe once we reached it. If I remember right, there's troops patrolling out of there.

"Now, there's a crick crosses the trail about fifteen miles farther on. If we can make that, it'll mean protection for the stock if we're attacked. We can likely hold off these sons while someone rides for help. Providin' we reach the crick, that is!"

HE CLUCKED the horses into a trot, glancing worriedly over his shoulder. "Push the drive on as fast as you can," he told Bautista. "I'll follow as quick as this rig'll move. The devils have prob'ly been riding hard since dawn, seeing as they're headed west. I'll try to outrun 'em if they come this way. You can cover me from the crick once you get the stock corralled there."

He watched the breed ride away, then he flicked the nigh leader with the whip and braced himself against the wagon's added movement.

It was less than an hour later when he saw the dust cloud to the north and a little behind—dust far off and rising high and lazy under the pounding of galloping hoofs. Sam's mouth pulled tight and he stood up and lashed the team, then he socketed the whip and loosened his hand gun in its holster.

The cloud moved swiftly, scattered and became separated knots of dust, no longer lazy at the closing range and each framing a frenzied, painted warrior low-lying and screaming on a pony's withers. The first shots, fired recklessly and one-handed, whined past the wagon. They were wide, kicking dust ahead and to one side.

Sam Brennan swore and fired once in return, knowing the chance of a hit was hopeless, but hoping somehow to slow the charge. He turned the leaders then, reining them to the right, angling toward the distant line of green along the horizon that marked the creek, and keeping the wagon's bulk between the raiders and the galloping team, praying they would keep their footing.

A shot, unheard in the madness, sent lead furrowing the length of the wagon bed, ricocheting through the backrest of the seat, peppering Sam's cheek with splinters. He turned again, swearing, swiping at the starting blood and trying to level his sights on a weaving target.

That's when he heard the wild yell go up from behind him, rising over and above the crazy screaming of the Mojaves. It was in Spanish, loud and outraged. From the corner of his eye, Sam saw Jimmy Sanchez rolling to one side, one pudgy hand clasped tightly to his thigh. Blood, bright red and shining in the sunlight, spread through the fingers of his hand from the splinter wound in his leg.

"Sacro nombre de Dios!" Jimmy shouted. "Is it that the siesta must always be interrup'? Jiminez Sanchez say before he will kill the hombre who—"

He stopped then, fully awake for the first time and realizing what was taking place around him. He shook a tremoling fist at the pursuing killers.

Then he yelled again. "So, it is this ones who will wake Jiminez Sanchez from the siesta, *si?*" and he jerked Sam's gun from the holster strapped to the sideboard beside him. He rolled onto his stomach and lay flat, his feet braced against the motion of the rocketing wagon.

His eyes squinted as he picked a target and squeezed off the trigger. The shot was like the popping of unseasoned wood in a cookfire, sharp but seeming harmless. But some fifty yards away a painted body, lying flat to a pony's neck, suddenly spread-eagled in the air and rolled, greasy hair bannering over bare heels, into the dust and lay still.

SAM BRENNAN watched, mouth ajar and unbelieving. Then suddenly he was yelling, though not hearing the sound. He dropped the hand gun to the boards and double-handed the reins. He stood spraddle-legged, lashing the team into stampede with whip and voice. Behind him Jimmy let go again, and a straining pony stopped as if it had stepped in a gopher hole and went down writhing, skidding along the earth.

Above the rocking blasts of gunpowder, Sam heard Jimmy's maddened shout. "Hah, señor Mojav! It is perhaps that you make the mistake this time, no?" and an ejected casing arched past Sam's ear as the cook levered home another shell.

Ahead of them at last was more dust, brown against the green of the creek's course, and that was Bautista and Singleton and Hammerling, with the remuda safe in the creek bed, galloping hell-bent to meet them. Behind, the firing ceased and Sam turned long enough to see the raiders swinging away, hearing the hoofbeats fading, leaving only the pounding shoes of his own blown team against the sudden silence. He fought them down, sawing them with the reins, easing them to a staggering, heaving walk.

When the three riders were alongside, Sam pulled the team down to a halt. He climbed on the seat for a moment and looked back. Four painted bodies were sprawled grotesquely in the thinning dust hanging over the trace. Then Jimmy crawled over the tailgate, his round face hard with anger, but with the puffiness of sleep still bracketing his eyes.

Sam Brennan said, "That was fine shooting, Jimmy. Where'd you ever learn to handle a gun like that?"

Jimmy shrugged modestly. "Señor boss, Jimmy has learn many things. In Sonora—" He stopped, looking at Sam questioningly.

Sam grinned. "Go on."

"In Sonora, Jimmy Sanchez have serve as the soldado with the great Benita Juarez against the *malo hombre* Maximilian. He have plenty practice. He learn to shoot good."

"That he has," Sam agreed fervently. He looked at the other, embarrassed, then he took a deep breath and said, "I been feeling kind of like a skunk lately, Jimmy. What with paying you no wages'n all. From now on you draw the same pay as the other boys. That is good, no?"

Jimmy Sanchez frowned. "That is good, no! What is this pay, this dinero? To one of my country that is *nada.* Nothing. What matters is the siesta when one is tired. The sleep in

the sun without the dreams, No?"

Sam Brennan's Adam's apple rose and fell. After a long time he sighed and said, "Well, I guess an extra hour or so a day won't hurt anyone. After this we'll stop until you've had your siesta. All right?"

"Bueno!" Jimmy agreed, beaming. He glanced at the lowering sun. "Then it is time that Jimmy begin to make with the pot and the pan." His little eyes shifted to the trail behind them where one of the Mojave horses lay unmoving in the dust. For an Indian pony, it was fat. Jimmy's eyes brightened. He licked his lips. "In Sonora—" he began.

"Unh-uh," Sam Brennan said hastily. "We'll settle for beans." Then he added, "But with the sauce, yes?"

Jimmy Sanchez looked downcast for a moment, but he said, "Frijoles—with the sauce, señor boss," and went to work."

One Against a Gunhawk Horde

By Clifton Adams

(Continued from page 18)

But Scar Face was tough. Two .38 slugs in the middle don't always mean the end of a man like that. He staggered back against the wall and brought his gun up again. He didn't have a chance. The little Colt rapped twice. The gunman broke in half and spilled in front of the door.

"For my father," the kid said softly. "And my brother."

Garret didn't move. He lay motionless there in the corner of the room where Johnny had hit him. He would be all right—all right enough to hang. Johnny meant to see that he hanged, but by a court and jury the way it was supposed to be.

He got up and took the .38 out of the kid's hands. "That's all, kid, that's enough. He'll get what's coming to him, you don't have to worry about that."

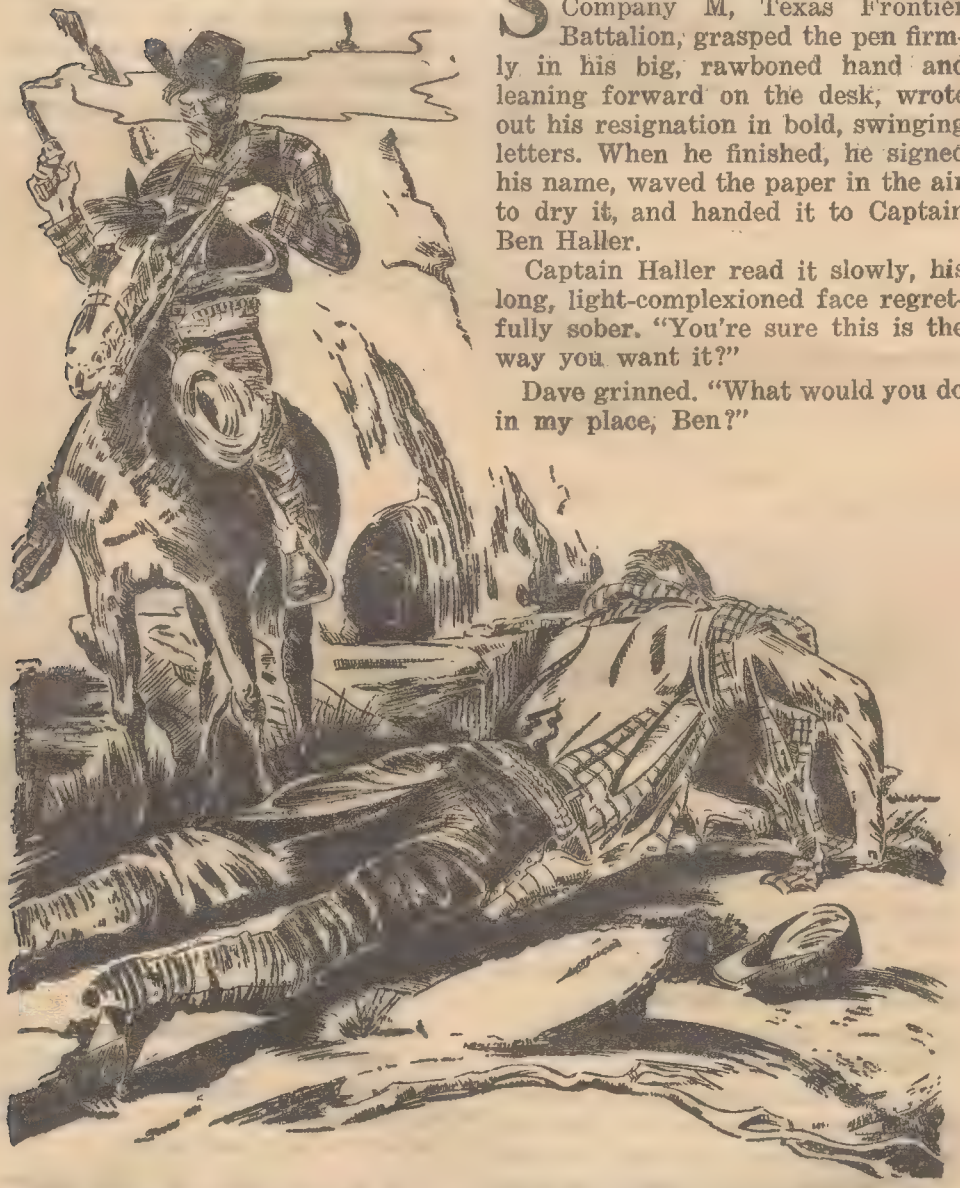
It was all right. There was no more hate in the kid's eyes. There wasn't anything. He stared past Johnny, through the door, out at the sun-scorched prairie.

"Señor—your deputy."

Johnny jerked his head around. The kid was right. Rod was walking up from the creek. Weakly, but walking, and as long as he was walking he couldn't be hurt very much.

Kathy saw him, but she couldn't move. Relief came to her eyes and suddenly she was crying. Women have a right to cry, especially if they have been through what Kathy had. They need somebody to go to. Johnny was glad that she had picked him.

All Aboard for Boot Hill!



CHAPTER I

SERGEANT DAVE MATHERS, Company M, Texas Frontier Battalion, grasped the pen firmly in his big, rawboned hand and leaning forward on the desk, wrote out his resignation in bold, swinging letters. When he finished, he signed his name, waved the paper in the air to dry it, and handed it to Captain Ben Haller.

Captain Haller read it slowly, his long, light-complexioned face regretfully sober. "You're sure this is the way you want it?"

Dave grinned. "What would you do in my place, Ben?"

When Dave Mathers left the rangers for a railroad job, he figured his days of stalking badmen were over. But skulduggery on the iron horse had only started, and Dave had to map out a new Colt career.

"I'd do just what you're doing—damn you." The captain's eyes met Dave's directly for a moment, then he said, "Ten years is a long time, Dave. I'm going to miss you." He sighed and smiled faintly. "But the C & W's getting a good man. So is Eileen Sherman." His long body lost its military stiffness then and he would have turned to face the window, but Dave pushed up out of the chair and stood facing him.

Dave regarded his friend carefully for a long moment, reading the veiled misery in his eyes. Words pressed against his tongue and his mouth set in an irritable line, not knowing how to say the words. Ten years *was* a long time, damn it!

For that time and more, he and Ben Haller had been saddle pards, starting out as frisky, unbroken colts together, running cattle in the *mesquitals* south of the Frio and Nueces rivers. They'd joined the rangers together, Dave rising swiftly from private through corporal to sergeant. But he'd hung there, while Ben, slower, less colorful, but a leader born, had caught up with him, pushed on to

a lieutenant, then becoming a captain.

With Eileen Sherman, the situation had been reversed. Ben had met her first and introduced her to Dave, the love he felt for her already showing in his voice and in his eyes, looking at her. And Dave, bold, somewhat brash, had thought at first he was merely trying to entertain the girl his friend was in love with. But gradually, without trying, he had won her away from Ben, finally admitting to himself that he was in love with her, too.

NOW, Eileen had consented to marry him. More than that, her father, Fred Sherman, president of the Clayton & Wilmot Railroad, had offered Dave a job as captain of the guards on the line at triple the wages he was receiving from the rangers.

Dave said, "Eileen's not getting the best man, Ben. I know that." His voice lifted humorously. "I'm liable to be back here asking you for my job back inside of a month. Now that Nugent's dead, the holdups on the C & W should stop. C. C. Leach, who owns most of the road, thinks Sherman's paying me too much money anyway."

Ben smiled at that. They shook hands and Ben said he'd have one of the boys gather Dave's plunder together and drop it off at the railroad office in Wilmot.

"Anything I can tell Eileen for you?" Dave asked.

Ben shook his head. "I'm taking the outfit into Wilmot this afternoon. Sherman wants to make a bit of a ceremony out of presenting you with the reward for killing Nugent. I'll see Eileen then."

Within the past year Wilmot had mushroomed from a sleepy little cowtown into a thriving, modestly boisterous metropolis. Two grand trunk railroads had laced it to the Eastern markets with thongs of steel, and the price of cattle had spurted almost with every ring of the sledges driving home the last spikes on the final lengths of track. Sheep, vast flocks of them, had moved into the ranges south of the town, and a homesteading rush had developed in the fine, thick-loamed, sheltered valleys of the Monument foothills off to the west.

Storekeepers, traders, hotelkeepers, businessmen of all descriptions had flooded the town until it grew round, like the belly of a barrel, shoving with ever increasing pressure against the staves that bound it in.

The gamblers, the saloonkeepers, the confidence men, and the owners of the dives and dance halls had flocked in with every train. A frightened citizenry, awakened to the budding hell that was blooming around them, quickly incorporated the town and elected a mayor and a board of aldermen. The board appointed a town marshal. He was shot and killed in Pariseau's Palace. They appointed another. He left town one night, the air around him pocked with lead from the guns of Ike Nugent and Sam Rydal, two of Pariseau's gunmen.

Company M, with Captain Haller at the head, came into Wilmot quietly and unheralded—and Pariseau's Palace was closed and Nugent and Rydal holed up in the mountains.

Then gold was struck in Clayton, a hundred miles to the northwest, among the limestone benches and granite bluffs of the Monuments.

FRED SHERMAN, Eileen's father, a Missourian who'd made a stake in the hide and tallow factories on the Gulf coast, and C. C. Leach, a thin, shrewd trader from New England, pooled their resources and threw a single-tracked railroad across the hundred miles of mesquite-covered plain, the arid, treacherous badlands snuggling against the Monuments, and up and across the deep-cleft gorges to Clayton. They drove the laborers to the last burst of effort, laying two miles, one mile, five miles a day.

The road got through in record time, and the first train, a gala beribboned string of four passenger coaches and two baggage cars, pulled out for the four-hour run to the martial strains of a brass band. All of the town's elect—the mayor, the board, the leading businessmen, Sherman and Leach, Ben Haller, Eileen, and Dave Mathers—were in the first coach. And all of the un-elect, the sleek, pale Pariseau with his dark mustache and vaguely taunting eyes, the other gambling-house owners and their professional gamblers and chore-boys, crowded into the other three.

Mr. Sherman had waved his stubby arms and snorted that they weren't getting on the train, but Leach had snapped, "Their fare's as good as the next man's. We'll take them!"

Pariseau had stood by, smiling thinly, while his equipment was loaded in the baggage cars, the roulette wheels, the faro tables, and the enormous Palace tent. Afterward, he nodded to Haller and Dave and said, "Clayton's across the New Mexico line, boys. I won't be seeing you."

Now, as he left the Wilmot Hotel and headed down the main street toward Sherman's office at the depot, Dave suspected that he'd be seeing Pariseau sooner than either of them had expected. For although his six-gun had blasted a death-dealing hole in Ike Nugent's body, Sam Rydal, Ike's partner, was still alive. He'd sworn to get Dave for killing Nugent. And Pariseau would spur him on. For the gambler wasn't a man to forget the way Dave and Company M had smashed the Palace to hell-and-gone before closing it up.

He cut right through an alley that led to the back of the office and went in the side entrance. Sherman was there and Eileen, and C. C. Leach was at a desk in the corner examining an account book. He looked up as Dave entered and nodded curtly.

"I still think a hundred and fifty a month is too much to be paying you."

Dave turned toward him. "I expect to earn it," he said quietly.

"Maybe." For all his tall thinness, Leach had a strong, harsh voice, like the rasp of a file across an edge of tin. "But I hope you don't have to. The Colt six-gun is the ruination of the West. It won't be a decent place to live in until every man who packs one is thrown into jail and left there until he rots! With its sale banned and its manufacture stopped, there'd be no more train holdups."

"What about the Winchester and the shotgun?"

"The Colt is king and you know it! You should know it." He rose and came around the desk, a yellow slip of paper in his hand. "Here's a bank draft for fifteen hundred dollars, blood money your Colt earned you for killing Nugent."

DAVE saw the warning look in Mr. Sherman's eyes and he felt the pressure of Eileen's hand on his arm, but try as he would he could not bite off the edge of his temper. His square jaw shifted angrily, and he said, "It's a curious thing, Mr. Leach, but you don't seem to feel as strongly about Sid Pariseau and his gamblers."

The man put his hands behind his back and his thin nose fairly snapped at Dave. "That's a different matter. You gamble or you don't. You keep your money or you lose it. No one forces you to go in." He brought one hand around in a wide, sweeping gesture. "But that—" he pointed to the six-gun at Dave's waist—"is an invitation to the first fool that comes along to try his speed! You're lucky you happen to be faster."

Dave looked at Fred Sherman. "I thought I was getting that fifteen hundred because I had the guts to trail Nugent alone back into the hills and brace him in that shack he was hiding out in." He threw a glance at Leach. "Don't forget Nugent had a

Colt, too. He packed two of them."

"Now, now, Dave," Sherman said. "Nugent's dead, which is what we wanted. What *I* wanted, anyway. Leach, here, is a fanatic for law and order. Only he don't know that without your kind of law, the only kind of order we'd have is what Sid Pariseau would deal out."

Dave let Eileen lead him out on the front walk, where Company M, with Ben Haller in front, was lined up to do him honor. His throat swelled and then tightened, but all through Sherman's short talk, he kept thinking of Leach, wondering what he'd done to earn the man's intense dislike. Was he really such a fool as he'd made himself out? Was he really so tight-fisted that he was unwilling to pay the hundred and fifty a month that Sherman had offered Dave to bring the gold shipments through safely? Or was there something else, something Dave couldn't put his finger on?

Ben Haller came forward when Sherman had finished and handed Dave a package. "This is from the company."

Dave unwrapped it, wondering, and found a handsome, silver-inlaid Colt six-shooter, with his name engraved on the barrel and the Texas star on the smooth, white ivory of the butt.

Leach snorted and walked into the office.

They followed him inside. One of the rangers put a large bundle in a corner and left. Ben said, "That's the gear belonging to you. I— Could I see you outside for a moment?"

His eyes sought Dave's and Dave saw the confusion, the uncertainty in them. Leach saw it too, and he snapped, "Speak up, man. Mathers works for us now. If it concerns him, maybe it concerns us."

"Sure, Ben," Dave said. "What is it?"

Ben took a sheet of paper from his inside pocket. "This is an affidavit from four men up in Clayton, sworn to before the judge up there. It says that Ike Nugent could not have held up the train that time, the time for which you went after him and killed him, because he was playing poker with them in Pariseau's Palace. All night."

"Whitaker, one of the guards, identified one of the gunmen as Nugent," Dave said.

"I know," Ben told him patiently, "but this is dated before you left on Nugent's trail. It should have been investigated."

A faint suspicion stirred in Dave as he asked flatly, "Where did you find it?"

Ben said, "It was in your stuff when we gathered it together."

Dave reached for the paper, a consternation flowing through him, his mouth open to deny that he'd even seen it, to insist that he knew nothing about it. But Leach's voice cut in ahead of him.

"It's a curious thing," Leach said dryly, mimicking Dave's earlier tone. "It's a curious thing what some men will do for fifteen hundred dollars!"

CHAPTER II

THAT evening, Dave and Eileen had dinner in the Wilmot Hotel dining room. He sat with his big shoulders hunched over the table, forcing himself to eat, but the food was tasteless to him. Ben Haller had been as nice as he could, but at the most he could give Dave only a week to prove Nugent had been guilty or the four men who signed the affidavit had lied. At the end of that time, Ben would have to send the paper and his report to the adjutant-general in Austin. What would happen then, Dave didn't know.

Eileen, across from him, displayed little interest in the meal. She was a quiet-spoken girl, about twenty, tall and slender, with dark hair and fine, fair skin, ordinarily composed and

contained. But now worry etched its message on her face, and her manner was agitated.

"But, Dave," she protested in a low voice, "you—you can't mean it. Why should we put off our marriage because of this? I believe you never saw that affidavit before. My father thinks not, and so does Ben. Ben even pointed out how easy it would have been for someone to hide the paper in your things while all of you were in town here last night."

Dave shook his head. "Leach doesn't think so. A lot of people may agree with him. I've been accused of being too high-handed before, Eileen."

"You're blunt, Dave. You're rash and you're headstrong. There's a spur of pride in you that won't let you back down to any man." She smiled fondly at him. "Those things appeal to a woman's heart. I don't care what anyone says, Dave. I know you. That's why I think we should be married in spite of it."

"No, Eileen," Dave told her gently. "I'm not coming to you with any blot on my record." The light from the hanging oil lamps glinted brightly from the ivory butt of his new Colt. "I'm going to clean this up, and then make the C & W safe for the Clayton mines to ship out their gold. After that, we'll see a preacher."

The next morning he took the seven o'clock train to Clayton. Whitaker and Rogers, the two guards, were in the coach. Their work was on the return trip. Now the baggage cars were laden with supplies for the mines and for the miners and their families.

Dave swayed along the aisle, adjusting his gait to the tilting movement of the train, and stopped when he came even with them. Whitaker, a lanky, lantern-jawed man, looked up and nodded, his slate-gray eyes expressionless.

"You sure it was Nugent took that last shipment?"

"Sounded like him," Whitaker told him. "The second road agent had us turned around when his pardner climbed into the car. I didn't see him, but when they palavered I thought I recognized Nugent's voice."

"Do you think it was Nugent, Rogers?"

The other guard met Dave's glance noncommittally. "I can't say."

Whitaker went on, "Sure it was Nugent. I wouldn't swear to it on the Book, but I think it was. I—" He stopped as Dave swung on up the aisle and into the car ahead.

DAVE held his step at the rear, closing the door slowly behind him. C. C. Leach was up ahead, so Dave picked a seat near the back and slid into it, his long legs angling across to the bench opposite. Smoke from the engine filtered a gray fog into the coach, and the shrill clamor of the whistle raveled back overhead and shredded off across the plains.

Brakes squalled and ground as they slowed for the sharp curve at Horsehead Bluff, the scene of the past robberies, before beginning the long climb through the badlands on up to Clayton. Dave wiped a patch of smog from the sooty window and surveyed the scene carefully. He noted how slowly they were taking the bend and how easy it would be for a gunman to jump up on the step and thrust a six-shooter into the engineer's back.

At the depot in Clayton, Dave waited until Leach had gotten off and entered the C & W office at the end of the station platform. Then he crossed the platform and turned into the one main street.

In its palmiest days, Wilmot had been but a pale yellow compared to the deep gold of Clayton's helldorado. Sid Pariseau held the town firmly in his hand and his big Palace tent ran day and night to accommodate the cross-shifts of the miners. Dave moved into the crowd and let it carry

him along until he came opposite the Silver Queen Lunchroom. He pushed in there and found a seat at the counter. It was almost noon when he'd finished and shouldered his way into the Palace.

The vast tent was thirty yards wide and fifty yards deep, lighted by chain-hung oil lamps overhead that burned twenty-four hours a day. A long mahogany knock-down bar flanked the room on the right, miners layered against it three deep. Dave thrust his way through them and dropped a quarter on the bar. He caught up the bottle and glass the bar-dog slid in front of him and jerked his head for the man to come closer.

"Sid Pariseau around?"

The man's toothy grin faded as he pondered the question. "Friend of his?"

"Used to be."

"He's in his office. Upstairs."

Dave downed the drink and edged between the gambling tables toward the rear. A two-story frame structure made up the back of the tent, a balcony running across the second story and a stair on the left leading up to it. There were two doors up there and as Dave reached the stairway, one of them opened.

C. C. Leach came out. He turned sharply to his right and went through the other door, his head held away as if not wanting to be seen by anyone down below. Dave mounted the stairs quickly and opened the door Leach had gone through. Another stairway led down and out the back. Leach wasn't in sight.

Dave stood briefly, considering this, and then put his hand against the door to Pariseau's office. It swung open easily at his touch and he stepped inside.

PARISEAU was in the act of clipping the end from a thin black cigar. Deliberately he finished what he was doing and leaned forward, lighting the stogie from a small oil lamp on the corner of his desk. Dave stared down at him through a thick cloud of sweet-smelling smoke.

"I've been expecting you," Pariseau said in his clipped, precise voice. His shrewd eyes took the measure of Dave's anger and he smiled slightly. "It's about the affidavit."

"You paid those men to lie."

Pariseau waved his hand in the air. "What of it? You're out of the rangers now. Stay here in Clayton. Whatever they decide in Austin, they can't touch you here."

Bewildered, Dave tried to fathom what Pariseau was getting at. The man brushed a hand across his string mustache, then poked his finger in Dave's direction.

"You killed Nugent. I could have used him here. Clayton's booming, and there's a lot of money to be raked in from the suckers." He paused and exhaled the smoke slowly from between his carefully pursed lips. "You'll be a married man soon. You could use some money. Big money—take Nugent's place."

Dave began to smile at the man's nerve and Pariseau smiled with him, but his eyes were humorless. "Don't count on finding Rydal and beating a confession out of him. He's hidden away in a safe place."

"Pariseau," Dave said softly, "I want you to tell those four men to admit they were mistaken about Nugent being with them." He laid his big hand on the desk, the knuckles whitening under the tension of his temper.

"Save your threats, Mathers," Pariseau sneered, "because they won't work. Lewis, Reed, Lawton, and Fallow aren't hangers-on of mine, as you seem to think. They're four small businessmen, shopkeepers, whose word will stand up in court. I've warned them that no matter what I tell them later, they're to say they

were here with Nugent. Whitaker, too. He's got a wife and kid. He's not quite sure, that it *was* Nugent."

THE web Pariseau had fashioned for him was coming into sight now, and Dave could see the big, thick strands hemming him in. If he couldn't get Rydal, if the four men who signed the affidavit were too afraid of Pariseau to backtrack, if Whitaker, damn him, played uncertain and then downright doubtful, there was no way out for Dave. Despite Eileen's trust and Ben Haller's faith, the matter would be settled coldly in the headquarters at Austin. It wasn't hard to guess their decision.

And that judgment would be the one accepted by Leach and the people of Wilmot. Leach would insist, and Sherman would have to agree that the C & W let him go. And Eileen—

His wrath stirred visibly in him and he leaned over the desk, both hands lunging at Pariseau's throat. The man drew back in his chair and his hand jerked up from under his desk. A coal-black derringer nestled in his palm, its ugly snout pointing at Dave's middle. Dave stopped his lunge in mid-air, cursing softly.

"The mines have held up the shipment of gold until they considered it safe," Pariseau whispered. "They're sending it out on tomorrow night's train. Let Rydal take it and you'll be cut in for a quarter."

"I'll see you in hell first!" Dave swung toward the door and the derringer followed him. He went out, slamming it to behind him, then he wheeled and went back in. Pariseau hadn't moved.

Dave asked, "What was C. C. Leach doing here?"

"Leach?" Pariseau countered smugly. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Dave had the names and the addresses of the men who'd signed the affidavit and he made the rounds of them. It was as Pariseau had said. They looked him in the eye, all small, frightened men, and they said they'd been with Nugent that night. He left them in disgust, mingled with a growing fear that Sid Pariseau held all four aces.

In the C & W office, C. C. Leach called him aside, whispering so the two clerks couldn't hear. "There's a big shipment of bullion going through tomorrow night. Keep it quiet, but be prepared for it." He glanced over his shoulder to make sure the clerks were not listening. "Besides the mine owners, you and I are the only ones who know about it—unless they've let it leak out."

Dave suppressed the ironic smile that surged to his lips. Quietly, he asked, "And you trust me with the job?"

Leach shrugged his thin shoulders. "You have Eileen Sherman to think about."

"Just how big is the shipment?"

"Over a hundred thousand."

Dave whistled softly. He knew now why Pariseau had switched his tactics and tried to buy him into his employ. This would be a big haul.

DAVE ran over the bare details of the setup quickly. The C & W ran four trains a day, two out of Wilmot in the morning and the same two out of Clayton later in the day. One at two o'clock and the other at seven. There were four guards, two on each train.

"Ship nothing on the two o'clock," Dave ordered bluntly, alive for Leach's reaction, "and hold the guards. We'll ride all four on the seven."

"You expecting trouble?" Leach asked sharply.

"Aren't you?"

Annoyance flared briefly in the man's eyes before he answered. "I guess it won't do any harm to take precautions." Without another word, he clamped on his black, flat-crowned hat and left the office.

And Dave watched him go, thinking, *Tell that to Pariseau, too!*

Dave heard the two o'clock pull out as he sat at Leach's desk, a paper and pencil in front of him while he tried to formulate a plan to block whatever move Pariseau made. His mind went over every mile of track, noting as before that the curve at Horsehead Bluff was the obvious place to attack the train. But the saloon owner was shrewd, too shrewd to—

Suddenly it came to him. The downgrade ten miles this side of Horsehead, where no one would be expecting it. A block could be thrown across the track and the baggage cars dynamited, killing all the guards. Then Rydal and his crew could load the bullion on pack animals and disappear into the rocky gorges of the Monuments.

He crumpled up the paper and threw it in a basket. To one of the clerks, he said, "Tell Mr. Leach I'm staying in Clayton tonight."

"Mr. Leach won't be back," the clerk informed him. "He took the two o'clock to Wilmot."

He left the office and mingled with the miners in the street, flowing along with the slow, turgid stream of people. Although it was still late afternoon the advancing evening threw its dark cloak over them, the westerly mountains cutting off the light from the setting sun. Only the second stories of the houses on the far side were touched by its sinking rays, the glass in the windows glinting brightly. Looking up, Dave saw a shadowy face behind one of them, peering down at him.

Sam Rydal! Light glittered from a six-gun in his hand!

Dave jerked his shoulder into the man next to him, swinging sharply as lead from the six-shooter smacked through the pane of glass, sending it crashing into the street. Another man beside Dave screamed and collapsed heavily on the sidewalk, moaning.

The crowd surged, pulling back, and Dave plunged through them toward the door of the house. He slammed it open and started up the stairs, hearing pounding steps fading down the back.

He wheeled then and ran out the front and around through the alley to the rear. A horse snorted and then its hoofs drummed sharply against the hard earth. Dave's gun was in his hand as he burst around the corner, but the horse and rider were far down, turning at a path already deep in shadow.

Dave flung two quick shots after them before they disappeared. He started to run along the alley and then stopped, seeing the futility of it.

Pariseau and Rydal had made their first try—and missed. There'd be a second.

CHAPTER III

THE pinched-faced bartender with the toothy grin was wiping glasses as Dave edged up to the Palace bar a half-hour later. The place was almost empty, since it was suppertime, except for the swampers cleaning up before the evening rush.

Dave held his left hand cupped on the bar and slid a silver dollar across it with the other hand. As the bartender propped a bottle and glass in front of him, he opened his fingers, exposing a small pile of gold coins, and closed them again. The bartender moved away, but his eyes kept flitting back to Dave's hand, a curious, acquisitive gleam in them.

Dave had a second drink and a third, not hurrying. The bar-dog began scrubbing a cloth down the bar, and when he came to Dave he said in a low voice, "Anything I can do for you, friend?"

"Know Sam Rydal?"

The bar-dog went on with his wiping. "Sure."

"Ever see him around here?"

"Sometimes."

Dave pushed the gold coins forward and the bartender's cloth closed over

them. "I want to get in touch with him. Name's Dave Mathers."

The bartender's mouth closed, the grin disappearing. He scoured the room with a frightened glance. "Where'll I get hold of you?"

"Send a message to the C & W office."

Dave reached for the bottle again, then, as if changing his mind, he put it down. "Guess I've had enough," he said, full voice. "See you again." He sauntered out the door.

He ate a leisurely supper at the Silver Queen, then rented a room for the night at a hotel off the main street. But when he reached the second floor, he went on through to the rear and down the back stairs and out. The floor of the C & W office was hard and the cushion from one of the chairs didn't make much of a pillow, but it was better than risking a lead-filled nightmare at the hotel.

When he awakened, the sun was shining and the room was filled with an insistent rattling at the doors. He brushed himself off before removing the chair he'd placed under the doorknob.

"Who's the big augur among the mine owners?" he asked the surprised clerk.

"Charles Dillingworth, Mr. Mathers. The man who owns the Big Six."

"Thanks." Dave swung around again at the door. "I'm expecting a message. Hold it for me."

DILLINGWORTH was in his office and proved to be a leathery-faced individual with a dry humor in his pale blue eyes.

"Mathers? Killed Ike Nugent, didn't you? Sure, I know you. Need a man like you to take this stuff through."

He led the way to a closely guarded warehouse and showed the six cases of bullion to Dave.

"How long will it take you to get it down there?" Dave asked him.

Dillingworth rubbed his chin. "Twenty minutes. Back a two-team wagon up to the door here and get it to the depot in no time."

"It's going on the two o'clock train."

"Two o'clock?" Dillingworth's pale eyes said there must be some mistake. "I thought it was the seven."

"That's what a lot of people think." Dave studied the cases for a minute. "Ever ship anything else out of here?"

"Used-up machinery, sometimes."

"All right," Dave snapped. "Pack the bullion into two cases and label it *Machinery.* Bring your wagon around now and cart it to the depot and dump it on a siding. Leave it there—unguarded."

"You crazy, man?"

"You want it to go through safely, don't you?" He waited for the man's nod. "Then do what I say."

He was waiting for the train from Wilmot when it pulled in at eleven. Eileen Sherman was the first one out of the coach and when she saw Dave she came running to him. Dave enfolded her in his arms for a moment and saw the question in her worried eyes.

"Not yet, Eileen," he told her. "Pariseau's got me hogtied so far."

Fred Sherman was behind her. He asked, "All set for tonight?"

"I'll see you inside," Dave said. He nodded to Eileen to follow her father and then caught the two guards who'd come in on the train. "Where are Whitaker and Rogers?"

One of the men, a short, stocky fellow with a square, honest face, told him they were leaving Wilmot on the nine. "Be here at one."

"You two stick around the depot," Dave said. "When Whitaker and Rogers get here, hold them."

He pivoted for the railroad office and stopped in his tracks. C. C. Leach was going through the door! If there was one man he wanted to keep this from, it was Leach. Whatever his tie-up with Pariseau was, he couldn't af-

ford to trust Leach with the information. But now it was too late! Sherman was in there, waiting for him and—

He heard a dry voice beside him. "I'll have to ask Sherman and Leach about this," Dillingworth said. "You may be stepping over your authority, Mathers."

WITH a slow, subtle anger working in him, Dave accompanied Dillingworth into the office. A small boy followed them in and grabbed Dave's gunbelt.

"You Mr. Mathers?"

Dave took the slip of paper from him and looked at it. It was from the bartender at the Palace. Two printed words: *Here now.*

Dave gave the youngster a coin and watched him high-tail it out of there.

Fred Sherman was crossing the room toward him, a newspaper in his hand. "Someone gave out the story about the affidavit," he intoned angrily. "It's all over the front page."

"A fine name the C & W will have now!" Leach snarled.

Dave ran his eyes down the page:

> **It is reliably reported that Dave Mathers, ex-Texas Ranger, now . . . C & W. . . killed . . . innocent man . . . fifteen hundred dollars reward. An affidavit signed by . . .**

"The hell with that!" Dave said recklessly, snatching the paper from Sherman's hand and crumpling it up. "We'll settle that later." He paused and looked around him. The two clerks were staring at him and he motioned for them to go out of the office.

After they were gone, he said, "Dillingworth's gold shipment will be on the two o'clock train."

"What?" Sherman and Leach both started forward.

"It's no secret that the gold's going out today." His eyes touched Leach. "Somebody tipped off Sid Pariseau."

"We picked tonight's train," Leach rasped.

"And we're changing our minds right now or I don't go with it."

"Hold on, Mathers," Dillingworth put in. "If you don't go, neither does the shipment. We can't afford to—"

Sherman said, "The two o'clock's all right with me. How about you, Leach?"

Leach waved his hands. "Anything you say. Mathers seems to be running things now."

Dave swung on Dillingworth. "Pack it, then, and get it down here." The mine owner left swiftly. To Sherman, "As soon as the one o'clock gets in we'll load the bullion and put on the guards. Then we'll pull out of here as fast as we can!" He lifted the ivory-butted Colt out of his holster, smiling at Eileen. "Honey, I'm going to shoot the C & W schedule full of holes!"

With a blank stare at Leach, he slapped the gun back into its leather sheath.

Crossing the street and going along the plank walk toward the Palace saloon, he shifted his shell-belt around until the holster lay snugly against his thigh. Rydal was in there now, getting his last minute instructions from Sid Pariseau. Only, if luck stayed with him, the gunman would never get the chance to carry them out.

THE toothy bartender moved down the bar to him and poured him a drink, bringing the glass up from behind the bar.

"He's upstairs with Pariseau now," he muttered.

Dave tossed the drink off, paid for it, and scrambled through the crowd to the rear stairway. He waited until no one was looking in his direction, then he mounted the stairs and put his shoulder against the office door. His gun was in his hand as he pushed inside.

The hard muzzle of a six-shooter jabbed into the small of his back just inside the door.

"Slow down, Dave," Pariseau said, his voice cold and tight. "Let it hit the floor."

Dave opened his hand and the new Colt, the present from the rangers, hit his foot and skidded into the middle of the room. Pariseau shoved him forward and pushed a chair after him. "Sit down."

The gambling-house owner came around then and stood with his back against his desk. His eyes were dark glints of ebony, piercing Dave from above the delicately held gun. "I said sit down!"

Dave remained where he was, cursing his lack of luck, cursing himself for his lack of caution. Pariseau became a dark, distorted shape in front of him and he leaned forward on the chairback.

"I told you Rydal was in a safe place. He's out now, getting ready to hold up the train. The *two o'clock* train."

"Leach couldn't have told you," Dave said through gritted teeth. His eyes blinked and he snapped them open, trying to focus them on Pariseau's wavering shape. The light from the window ran the length of the six-gun pointed at him and he tried to clear his mind to measure the distance between them.

Pariseau was saying, "Leach? When you saw him here, he wanted to pay me to get the signers of that affidavit to take it back. He hates my guts, but for the good name of the C'& W he was ready to pay me anything I asked." The gun had angled down and he brought it up now. "No, I heard about the change in plans from one of the guards at Dillingworth's warehouse who overheard you this morning. I pay well."

Dave's head was nodding and he jerked it upright. His legs felt swollen and stiff and his shoulders and arms were growing numb. He pulled the chair toward him and it felt like a dead weight.

Pariseau, watching him, laughed briefly and thrust the gun back in his pocket. "Go ahead, Mathers, throw it at me. See if you can lift it."

Dave tugged at the chair, but it seemed nailed to the floor. His head was whirling, growing heavier, and he felt his knees buckling under him.

"You're through, Mathers," the voice came from far away. "That drink the barkeep gave you was hopped to the hilt with knockout drops."

DAVE'S sleep was long and troubled, filled with the wildest kind of nightmares. He dreamed that he was on the floor of Pariseau's office and that Pariseau was pushing a chair back and kicking him repeatedly in the side. He thought he was pulling his arms up to protect himself and that a boot-heel caught him in the back of the head, smashing his face against the floor.

There was a stretch of peaceful quiet and then he dreamed his feet were lifted and he was dragged down a flight of stairs, his head bouncing and bumping against every step. He heard the restless stamp of a skittish horse and then he was picked up and thrown headlong over a hard object. A rope was tied to his feet and, after a scurry of unidentifiable sound, he felt his feet being pulled and then a rope being wrapped around his hands.

A dark, smothering object was thrown over him, and he began to bounce up and down, swaying from side to side. The hot salt smell, the hard pressure against his middle, and the tilting, back and forth motion made him sick to his stomach and he retched repeatedly.

He knew no more then until hands grasped him and he was thrown on a stretch of hard, rocky ground.

A voice said, "He's liable to come to," and his eyes opened to the blinding glare of sunlight. A dark object swung in sharply and crashed against his jaw, and the sunlight disappeared

in a murk of inky, lightning-studded darkness.

Time passed and his rasping, labored breathing awakened him. He writhed there, his body a long dull ache, but his hands and feet were free of the bonds that had held them. Slowly, by a great effort of will, he shoved an arm down his side, to his holster, his fumbling fingers finding it empty. He remembered then that the Colt was on the floor of Pariseau's office and he wondered where they had taken him.

The voice again, saying, "Now's as good a time as any." And then a great crash of sound, leaping out at him, echoing eternally around his head. And a darting, scarifying pain in his left side, bursting in a blood-red bloom before his tightly clenched eyes. He gasped and flung his arms forward, b r u i s i n g his knuckles against hard, solid rock. . .

The next thing he knew he was inching himself ahead, pulling with his arms against the ground and pushing with his feet. A field of light spread before his opening eyes and he lifted his head toward the tented sky.

He rolled then, suddenly, tumbling down the hillside, to come up with a crash in an alder thicket. He put out his hand to lift himself and he felt the chill wetness of a small stream.

He ducked his head, the cold refreshing water shocking him back to full consciousness. Pain leaped through him as he pulled himself to his feet, staring at the wound in his side.

THE blood had clotted on his clothes and he stuck his hand inside them gently, feeling for the place the bullet had gone, deep in the flat muscle below and outside his last rib. Back up the hill was the mouth of the cave where they had left him, and Dave asked himself, *Why?*

Why had they left the piebald pony there, its dangling reins caught on the withered stump of a scrub oak, its head jerking nervously as it watched his movements?

Dave dipped his hand in the water again and ran it over his face and neck, the pain in his side easing now. He knew it was no mistake, no oversight, that he hadn't been killed. Pariseau's gunmen didn't work that way. They'd left him there for a purpose.

He struggled up the hill, past the mouth of the cave, looking around to try to get his bearings. The sun was dropping fast and he wondered what had happened to the train, if Rydal had stopped it successfully or if his attack had been beaten off. At the top, he turned.

Behind him, the hills rose sharply to the towering Monuments, but in front, over the next ridge, was the straightaway grade of the C & W track winding down to Horsehead Bluff. The train was stopped there, the top blown off one of the baggage cars, the ruins still smoldering.

As Dave watched, the crowd milling around the passenger coaches lined up beside the smoking car. Aided by a dozen horsemen on the other side, their mounts straining against wire-tight lariats, they heaved the car over on its side, out of the right of way. The engine backed slowly, black smoke pouring upward from its bell-shaped funnel, hooked the remaining cars, and waited for the passengers to clamber aboard before continuing the run to Wilmot.

So Rydal had been successful! The riders, those circling the spot of the robbery, rising into view and then dipping out of it, were searching for sign to trail the outlaws. He strained to see more clearly and picked out the stiffly erect figure of Captain Haller. Then this was Company M! Sherman or Leach must have asked them to ride all night to meet the seven o'clock—and instead they'd come on to find the smoldering remains of this one.

He straightened quickly and the pain burned hotly in his side and then

subsided. He knew, without having to be told, what Ben Haller had found at the scene of the holdup. The new, ivory-handled Colt with his name on it, the gift from Company M! Pariseau had had it left there to saddle him with the robbery. The gun, the bullet hole in his side, the . . .

Dave hobbled down to the horse, slipping and sliding on the loose rock, gritting his teeth against the pain that racked him. Two brands on the horse's side had been blotted out. The carbine—he jerked it out of the boot. Every shot had been fired.

He grabbed the reins of the animal, intending to contact Haller and lay the thing bare, but he brought himself up short. An idea had come to him and he had thrust it back, but it returned, insistent, persuasive.

BEN HALLER was in love with Eileen Sherman, too. Would he be willing to stake his position, his career in the rangers on the fantastic story Dave would tell him? This, on top of the affidavit, would make any man believe that Dave Mathers had sold out, had cut to the wrong side of the law, his fingers stained with the golden hunger.

And Ben, disbelieving, taking the facts as everyone would interpret them, would have a clear field with Eileen.

Dave pulled the horse around, following the bed of the tiny stream, circled the base of the hill. There, out of sight of the circling riders, he mounted painfully and gave the piebald its head in the direction of Clayton.

It was dark when he reached the town, stopping on the outskirts. He took the empty carbine from the boot and loosened the bit in the horse's mouth, sending it off into the darkness with a slap on the flank. Then he tramped through back alleys until he reached the rear of Pariseau's Palace.

A light burned behind the open window of the saloon owner's office on the second floor, and a dark blotch moved before it and then disappeared. There was a short roof under the window and a run-off trough for rainwater sided the building, but, in his weakened condition Dave knew it would be impossible for him to scramble up there.

He remembered the back stairway, the one he'd seen Leach take, and he stumbled through the heaps of refuse and empty beer kegs until he found it. The partition between the office and the stairs was thin, and as he mounted them he heard voices arguing. He smiled grimly, hoping it would be Rydal in there. Throw a quick bluff at them with the empty carbine and get one of their six-guns.

At the top, he swung the stair door open and slid along the wall to Pariseau's door. The noises of the saloon blasted up at him there, the banging of a tinny piano, mingled with a woman's coarse laugh, and the even tones of a gambler calling cards at a near-by table. Lifting the carbine in front of him, he pushed the door open with his foot.

Pariseau saw him first and the surprise on his face whirled Rydal around. The gunman's hand flashed toward his hip and Dave barked, "Hold it, Rydal!" He held the door open, his leg against it, and a breeze blew through toward the open window, bringing with it the smell of whisky and body sweat and tobacco smoke.

The flame of the oil lamp on Pariseau's desk wavered fitfully, sending changing shadows over his rigid features.

"Drop your gunbelt, Rydal," Dave ordered.

THE gunman stood motionless, his craggy face immobile, his eyes fixed on the carbine in Dave's hands. Dave said, "The two of you are coming out here on the balcony. That crowd down there will be interested

in hearing the truth. And all of it."

Rydal had lost his stiffness now, and he jerked over his shoulder, "We've got nothing to lose, Sid. That looks like the carbine we left with him—empty."

His hand started toward his side and Dave lunged forward, lifting the carbine above his head, but a sharp pain creased him across the middle. The torn sleeve he'd tied over his wound broke free and he felt the warm blood trickling down his side.

"What do you want done with him?" Rydal asked, his Colt cutting a bright arc across the room at Dave.

"Later," Pariseau said tonelessly. A gun was in his hand now, its front sight centered on Rydal. "Where did you put the bullion?"

Rydal's eyes left Dave and black wrath rippled across his face. "It's like I told you, Sid. There wasn't any. Nothing was in the baggage cars, not even a guard."

Dave's pulse quickened. Was this the truth or was Rydal holding out on Pariseau? He clutched at it, speaking quickly.

"He's lying to you, Sid. I came to and got to the top of the hill. I saw them stop the train and I saw them blow up the baggage car. They took two big cases out of it, broke them open, and loaded what was in them on pack animals."

Rydal wheeled on him, his sagging gun-hand rising. "You'll get yours, Mathers! I should have killed you back there on the hill! Maybe I will now."

"You will not!" The voice came from the open window, a hard rasping voice that followed it with, "Put up your hands!"

Dave's eyes shifted quickly and he saw the long barrel of a Winchester poking into the room, and behind it, lips pressed tightly together, was C. C. Leach. "I figured if anything happened to that train Pariseau would have something to do with it, and I hid out here to see what I could overhear," Leach told them. "And I've got enough to hang both of you. Rydal, you—"

But the gunman had flung his hand around, trying for a snap shot. The bullet flew high, smashing into the pineboard siding, and C. C. Leach pointed the Winchester and squeezed the trigger.

The crack of the rifle and the sound of Rydal's tumbling over into the wall came together. A long, hoarse sigh came from the gunny's lungs and he lay very still.

PARISEAU had jerked up out of his chair and was crouched down on the side of the desk nearest Dave. His first shot bellied through the pane of glass above Leach's head, showering down glittering splinters. Dave, forgetting his wound, threw himself headlong for Rydal's gun.

The saloon owner's second shot sang as it ricocheted off the Winchester, leaving a white gash on the barrel where it struck near the railroad man's neck.

Dave had Rydal's gun now and he threw himself over on his back, swinging it down on Pariseau. He saw Leach pull the Winchester down, his face ashen white, trying desperately to lever a cartridge into the chamber. Pariseau, sensing the new danger, flung himself around, but the gun in Dave's hand hammered out its lead and Pariseau's head jerked up, the bullet driving through his chin and out the top of his head. He tottered there on his knees, momentarily, and then bent slowly until his head touched the floor.

C. C. Leach put his long body through the window and helped Dave to his feet.

"You see what I mean, you young hellion?" he snapped. "That Winchester saved my life. If I'd had a Colt in my hand, Pariseau's bullet would have gone right through my neck!"

Dave, after the doctor had dressed his wound, hoisted himself on a desk

in the C & W office. Eileen was beside him and Fred Sherman and Ben Haller were there. C. C. Leach paced up and down the floor, his hands clamped tightly together behind his back.

"Maybe you've got more to you than I thought, young fellow," he barked at Dave. "Coming back to brace Pariseau and Rydal like that with an empty carbine. Took sand! Took brains, too, to guess they'd leave that Colt at the blown-up train."

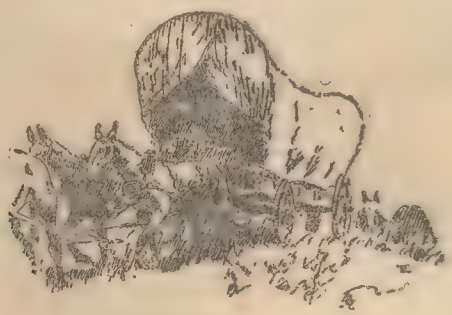
"You saved the shipment, not me," Dave told him frankly, "shifting it to the seven o'clock."

Leach lifted his shoulders and dropped them. "Figured when you didn't come back someone was onto us." He resumed his pacing. "Law and order!" he muttered. "I'm going back to New England! If you'll look after my interest in the C & W for me."

"Why, Mr. Leach," Eileen exclaimed, very pleased, "Dave will be happy too!"

"Who's asking you?" Leach snorted. He poked his finger at Dave. "Young man, don't let a woman talk you into anything!"

"It's too late, Mr. Leach," Dave said. "She already has."



The Law in Lynch Town

By Joseph Commings

(Continued from page 28)

There was a harsh metallic clash, two steel jaws coming together. Sanger let out a howl of agony and started to curl up over the chest, his left hand still inside. The revolver in his right hand went off spasmodically. But Pike had dropped on the ground and was tumbling toward his own guns.

The revolver fell out of Sanger's right hand as it dived in to rescue his left. Pike got up and stood over the groaning murderer. He could hear feet running toward the house. In a few moments half the town would be there.

"No money," said Pike happily. "I replaced it with one of Mather's bear-traps."

During Clint Sanger's second and swifter trial, the defense lawyer tried to turn him free on a legal quibble. The defense claimed that since Sanger had been executed once and declared officially dead by Kato Bluff, a "dead" man could not be held accountable for the subsequent killings of Judge Alcutt, Parson Jim, and Marty Mather. But the town didn't go for it. They wanted another hanging. And this time Rainey Pike made certain that Clint Sanger stayed hanged.

Ernie Stafford took the coward's way out when his holdup plans misfired, for one hombre saw through his . . .

Black Sheep Bravado

By Ray Gaulden

ERNIE STAFFORD came out of the hardware store, a new shovel under his arm, and started down Redcliff's single street. He saw his brother, Logan, riding into town from the west. Logan Stafford sat loosely in the saddle, the early morning sun glinting on the sheriff's badge pinned to his cowhide vest.

Ben Travis, the saddle maker, was standing on the porch of his shop and he called to the sheriff. "Was it a wild goose chase, Logan?"

The sheriff nodded. "I had a long ride for nothing. Wasn't any sign of

Bucky Howell around that old line shack."

Travis looked a little worried. "I was hoping you'd get him before he starts raising hell around here like he has a lot of other places."

"I won't overlook any bets, Ben," Logan said, and rode on down the street.

Ernie Stafford crossed to the old log building that served as sheriff's office and jail. He leaned the shovel against the front of the place and rolled a smoke, watching Logan ride up and dismount.

"Hello, Ernie."

Ernie frowned. "You look like you're all in. What's this talk about Bucky Howell?"

Logan removed his gloves and slapped some of the dust from his shoulders. "I got a wire from the county seat yesterday," he said, "telling me that Bucky Howell, the outlaw, was seen passing through there, heading this way."

Ernie's face was serious. "That don't sound good, Logan."

The sheriff sighed. "No, it don't. I got a tip that a stranger was seen around that old line shack at the upper end of Goose Creek. But if it was Bucky, he was gone by the time I got there."

Ernie waited in the doorway of the office while Logan put his horse up. The sheriff came back, swearing softly. "These boots are killing me," he said. "Don't know why I keep wearing them."

He dropped into his swivel chair and took the boots off. He leaned back, sighing with relief. He looked at his brother. "How's everything going with you, kid?"

Ernie grinned crookedly. "I needed a new shovel. I didn't have the price, so I charged it to you."

Logan put his feet up on the desk. "Broke, huh?"

Ernie felt a little tug of resentment. "I'll make out," he said.

The sheriff reached in his right-hand pants pocket and came up with a ten-dollar bill. "You better take this and buy you some grub."

Ernie accepted it with reluctance. "I'll pay you back one of these days," he promised.

"Forget it," Logan said.

Ernie moved toward the door. Then he stopped and looked back. "You ought to try going to bed once in a while," he said.

Logan glanced longingly at the couch in the corner. He said, "If you'd take a job as deputy, I wouldn't have to work so hard."

Ernie shook his head. "One law-dog in the family is enough. I'll just go on working my claim, and one of these days I'm going to strike it rich."

Logan smiled wearily. "I don't want to throw a wet blanket on your hopes, but I don't think there's a dime's worth of gold on the place. Anyway, since you won the claim in a poker game, you can't lose much."

A FEW minutes later Ernie Stafford walked down the street toward the livery stable, his hand in his pocket, feeling of the ten-dollar bill his brother had given him. Ernie felt the pull of bitterness. He was getting tired of Logan's charity. He was sick of having folks look at him and say, "There goes Logan Stafford's brother. Logan's a fine fellow, but the kid ain't much good. Always been kind of lazy and shiftless. Logan's had to look after him since the old man died."

Ernie decided he needed a drink. He went into the saloon and leaned the shovel against the bar. Davis, in a clean white apron, came up, smiling pleasantly. "What you going to have, Ernie?"

"Whisky, I reckon."

Davis nodded and set a glass and a quart bottle in front of him. The bartender asked, "What do you think about Bucky Howell being in these parts?"

Ernie shrugged, saying nothing.

The batwings opened and Art Pres-

ton, superintendent of the Blackhawk mine, came in and moved up to the bar. "Just a beer," he said.

Davis drew one. He said, "What's the matter, Art? You look kind of worried."

Preston nodded gravely. "It's this Bucky Howell," he said. "This is the first of the month and I've got to send the payroll up to the mine."

Davis rubbed the bar with a wet towel. "Well, I wouldn't get too worked up, Art. As long as Logan Stafford is wearing a badge in this town, ain't no owlhooter going to stick around for long."

Preston sipped at the beer. He said, "Logan's a good man, all right, but that payroll amounts to quite a bit."

Ernie left the two of them talking and went out. The whisky had warmed his insides and started him thinking. He walked down the street, turning over in his mind what Preston had said about the payroll. He told himself that it was a perfect setup. If there was a holdup and the payroll stolen, it would be blamed on Bucky Howell.

Ernie passed the Redcliff Café and he thought about Louise Britton, the girl who worked there. Louise and Logan had gone together for years, and Ernie knew that most folks figured the sheriff would never rake up the nerve to ask her to marry him. Logan didn't work very fast, but he had finally gotten around to it. The wedding was to take place next month.

Ernie felt a twinge of jealousy, for he had never been able to get Louise out of his mind, even if she was his brother's girl. Logan was always asking Ernie to take Louise to the dances. Logan claimed he was just too damned clumsy when it come to something like that. Ernie cut quite a figure on the dance floor and he knew how to speak the kind of words a girl likes to hear. He knew that Louise liked him and he figured it wouldn't be too hard to win her away from Logan. If he had a stake, he could get out of this two-bit town. He could go to Mexico or somewhere and send for her.

He walked on toward the livery stable, grimacing as he thought about Louise marrying Logan and wasting her life away here, growing fat with a bunch of kids tagging around after her.

Ernie thought about the mine payroll again. It would be a cinch. Nobody would ever suspect him. He could say he hit a pocket of gold. He could wait until things cooled off and then pull out.

He went into the livery stable and saw Dillard Clay leaning on a pitchfork. The old man was a sorry sight, Ernie thought. He did odd jobs around town—worked here some, cooked in the café part of the time, and once in a while served as jailer when Logan was out of town. There had been a time, Ernie had heard, when Dillard Clay was a great actor, touring the world, but whisky had made a wreck out of him and he had wound up in Redcliff when a stock company he was traveling with went broke.

"Going back out to the claim, Ernie?" Clay asked.

"Yeah," Ernie said. "I can't find any gold hanging around town, but I had to have a new shovel."

Ernie tried to hide his displeasure, but he didn't like the way the old man was always looking at him, searching his face with those strange probing eyes of his.

DILLARD CLAY ran his fingers through his cotton-white hair, but his eyes never left Ernie's face. He said, "You want to hurry up and find some gold, Ernie, because Logan and Louise will be getting married pretty soon. And you'll have to buy them a wedding present."

Ernie felt the muscles in his stomach tighten for he had caught a subtle insinuation in the old actor's voice. Ernie thought, *He knows how I feel about Louise.*

Forcing a smile to his lips, Ernie said, "I'll buy them the finest present in Learner's store."

He got his horse and rode out of town. By the time he reached his claim on Goose Creek, the plan had formulated in his mind. He was going to get that mine payroll. He dismounted in front of the cabin he had won in a poker game from an old, half-drunk prospector. He looked at the bank into which he had been digging and he made a wry face. It was as Logan had said. There wasn't a dime's worth of gold here. He was working himself to death for nothing.

He went into the cabin, remembering the old trunk that the last occupant had left here. He dug down in it and came up with a straw hat and a pair of ragged overalls. He was glad now that he hadn't thrown them away. He rolled them up and returned to his horse.

The big Blackhawk mine was located about five miles from Redcliff, up Buckskin Gulch. Ernie followed the creek a little way, then cut off and began to climb into the mountains. He had a spot in mind where the gulch widened out into a little park. He rode down through the spruce and blackjack and drew up behind a screen of brush. He got down quickly and climbed into the overalls. He pulled the old straw hat down tightly on his head and knotted a handkerchief around his neck, so he could cover his face with it when the time came.

He went down to the trail and hunkered down behind a big, egg-shaped boulder. He knew that old Rawhide Avery always left town right after dinner. Ernie had seen him several times, driving the old buckboard with that little black satchel full of money.

Time dragged and Ernie glanced at his watch. Old Rawhide Avery ought to be coming along pretty soon. Ernie checked the loads in his gun and he thought, *This isn't kid stuff, Ernie. You're playing for big stakes, and if you get caught, Logan won't be able to get you out of it.*

But he wasn't going to get caught, he assured himself. There was nothing to worry about. He started to reach for his tobacco sack, but stopped when he heard the sound of wheels on the rocky trail. His pulse began to pound and he pulled the handkerchief up over his face. He waited until the buckboard was close, then, gripping his gun tightly, he jumped out from behind the boulder.

The buckboard stopped and he saw that old Rawhide was not alone. Young Bill Preston, son of the mine superintendent, sat on the seat beside Avery, a sawed-off shotgun across his knees. They sat motionless, staring at Ernie, and Preston looked as if he couldn't decide whether to use that shotgun or not.

"You better throw it down," Ernie said, and when the weapon hit the ground, he felt better. You never could tell about a young buck like Bill.

Ernie moved a step closer. He felt his mask starting to slip and he pulled it back in place. The gun in his hand didn't wobble. "You know what I'm after," he said. "Let's have it."

Old Rawhide scowled. He was a skinny man with long yellow hair, a veteran of the stage trails. He reached for the moneybag and tossed it at Ernie's feet. "There you are, Bucky," he said.

Ernie felt like grinning, but he kept a straight face. He motioned with the gun. "All right, you fellas can go now."

AS ERNIE backed up a little, he felt the mask starting to come down again. He reached up quickly, but he wasn't in time. He saw their eyes widen with recognition and panic rushed through him, swift and cold. They knew him. They would blab his name all over town. A posse would be on his tail in nothing flat.

There was fear in him and there

was the sickening realization of what he must do. He brought his gun up and old Rawhide said hoarsely, "Don't do it, Ernie."

But he had to do it now.

Bill Preston uttered a little cry and looked as if he were going to jump at Ernie. He was half off the seat when Ernie started firing. He shot six times and he didn't miss. He saw the little puffs of dust spurt from Rawhide's vest. He saw the old man pitch over the side of the buckboard to the ground. He had three bullets in him and so did Bill Preston, who lay with his head hanging over the dashboard. Ernie knew without looking closer that they were dead. A man didn't live with three bullets in his chest.

As revulsion crawled in his stomach, Ernie grabbed the black satchel and ran back to where he had left his horse. He mounted and rode swiftly up out of the gulch. After a mile or so, he stopped long enough to bury the money and to take off the old clothes. Then he rode on, a sick look in his eyes.

He reached his cabin and hurried inside. There was a pint bottle of whisky on a shelf and he grabbed it down. He drank half of it without pausing, and by the time he had finished it, his insides had quit shaking and the effects of the killing began to wear off. He hadn't figured on having to use his gun, but he told himself that was just one of those things.

An hour passed and it was dark. He had pulled himself together now and he got his horse and rode into town. He stopped by the sheriff's office, but Logan wasn't there. Probably out with a posse, Ernie decided.

He went to the saloon and found the place deserted except for Davis.

"Where's everybody?" Ernie asked.

The saloon man's eyes were bright with excitement. "You mean you haven't heard about the robbery?"

Ernie shook his head. "Just got in town."

Davis set a clean glass on the bar. "Well, it looks like Bucky Howell has already gone to work. He lifted the mine payroll and I think he killed old Rawhide and Bill Preston. I didn't get all the story, but Logan's up there now."

"They ought to string that Howell gent up," Ernie said.

Davis nodded. "I'll bet you they do just that if they find him, and if I know Logan, he won't give up till he does."

Ernie went out and stood on the porch a moment. He glanced at the café and thought about having a cup of coffee, but he decided against it. Logan ought to be back pretty soon and Ernie was anxious to hear what his brother had to say.

The sheriff's office was dark and Ernie lighted a lamp. He sat down in the swivel chair and thumbed through an old magazine. A few minutes later, he heard the mutter of hoofs, telling him that the posse was coming back. He tossed the magazine aside and went to the doorway, stood there watching his brother ride up and climb down stiffly.

Logan came in and closed the door. His eyes were red-rimmed and his face was slack. He looked tired enough to drop in his tracks, Ernie thought.

Ernie said, "I heard what happened. Do you figure it was Bucky?"

Logan sighed wearily. "It must have been him, but from what I hear, it's not like Bucky Howell to shoot men down like that."

"Killed both of them, did he?" Ernie asked.

The lamp was smoking and Logan turned the wick down a little. He said, "We found Bill Preston, but there wasn't any sign of Rawhide. I figure he must have crawled off in the brush somewhere and died. We'll have another look as soon as it's daylight."

ERNIE had a hard time remaining calm. Supposing Rawhide was still alive? But he couldn't be—not

with three bullets in his chest. What Logan had said didn't make sense. Ernie felt his brother's eyes on him and he wondered if there was suspicion in them.

Suddenly Ernie froze, listening to the slow, dragging sound of boots outside. He stared at the door, his breath caught in his throat. Somebody was out there, coming closer. It seemed hours, to Ernie, before the door opened, but it finally did. Ernie stared in horror. He wanted to scream. The sound built up in his larynx, but he fought it back down. He couldn't go to pieces. He had to watch himself.

The door swung wide and a figure stood swaying in the opening. The white, pain-twisted features of old Rawhide Avery bobbed in the lamplight. There was dried blood on his face and his yellow hair was down in his eyes. His chest was heaving and he stared with hot, accusing eyes at Ernie Stafford. He said in a thin whisper, "You thought you had killed me, Ernie, like you had Bill. You thought you didn't have a thing to worry about."

Ernie felt as if a steel band was about his chest, shutting his breath off, causing the blood to pound in his ears. For a moment, he couldn't move, then he leaped back, uttering a little cry and trying to get his gun out. Logan stepped forward and knocked the weapon out of his hand.

Ernie backed away. He was sobbing, he was shaking, and he was unable to tear his eyes from old Rawhide, who had staggered into the room and was leaning weakly against the wall.

The sweat ran down into Ernie's eyes and a voice was screaming at him, *Run, you damn fool! Run!* He glanced at the door, his eyes frantic. He didn't figure he would make it; he figured they would cut him down. But he was going to have a try at it. With fear lashing him, he leaped forward and ran through the doorway. He raced down the street, fleeing blindly into the darkness. . . .

Logan Stafford slumped dejectedly against the desk, his face gray. He said heavily, "It's hard to believe that the kid did a thing like that, Dillard."

Dillard Clay, made up to look like Rawhide Avery, stopped acting now. He straightened and came across the room. He said, "Are you going to let him get away, Logan?"

There was anguish in the sheriff's eyes. He said, "The kid can't get away, Dillard. I've got all the trails blocked. But I won't have to be the one that stops him."

Clay pushed his dyed hair back out of his eyes. The grease paint made his face feel stiff. He said, "I'm sorry it turned out like this, Logan, but old Rawhide was a friend of mine and I decided to play a hunch. I've been worried about Ernie for a long time."

Logan stared bitterly at the floor. He said, without looking up, "I didn't know you suspected Ernie when you asked me to lie and say we didn't find old Rawhide." He paused a moment and then asked, "But why didn't you think it was Bucky Howell that pulled the job?"

"Because I used to know Bucky before he hit the owlhoot. We were pretty close and I can tell you that Bucky hasn't done half the things that have been laid to him. Bucky writes to me every now and then, and I happen to know that he's in South America right now."

Dillard Clay went out and turned down the street. He wasn't proud of the role he had played tonight, but he was glad that he had never thrown away his little make-up kit. He knew he was just an old, broken-down hasbeen. But he figured he had turned in a pretty good performance tonight.

The Terrible Texan

Some highlights in the adventurous life of a salty pioneer gunfighter.

By Nat McKelvey

THIS is the story of a Texan who was born in Virginia in 1816 and who had two friends remarkably named "Sweep Lips" and "Old Butch." No less remarkable was his own name, William Alexander Anderson Wallace.

Descendant of Scottish fighting men, Wallace soon earned the nickname of "Big Foot" and became, in the words of J. Frank Dobie, historian, the "saltiest, rolliekiest, most genial, most individualistic pioneer Indian fighter, Mexican layer-out, and lone-wolf dweller of the open range that Texas had ever had."

As a lone wolf, Big Foot Wallace remained a bachelor, but as the "most genial" Texan he enjoyed a good joke on anybody, even the fair sex. Once, while traveling home to Virginia, he rested his two hundred pounds of bone, sinew, and muscle at New Orleans' famous inn, the St. Charles. While a guest, he attended a quadroon ball which he promptly turned into a Texas Stampede.

"In the Texas Stampede," Big Foot explained to his friend, John Duval, "the ladies range themselves on one side of the room, and the gentlemen on the other. Then one of the gentlemen neighs, and if a lady whinnies in answer, they both step forward, and become partners for the dance. If the gentleman is very homely and, after neighing three times, no lady should answer, he steps out of the ring and hopes for better luck next time.

"When the couples are all paired off in this way, the manager calls out, 'gallopade all,' and all lope around the room briskly three or four times. Then the gentlemen curvet to their partners, and the ladies coquettishly back their ears and kick up at the gentlemen. Then the ladies canter up to the gentlemen, who rear and plunge for a while, then seize the ladies' hands, and pace off in couples around the room.

"First couple then wheel and go off at a two-forty lick, second couple ditto, and so on till the race becomes general, when the manager calls out 'Whoa!' and everybody comes to a sudden halt. The manager then calls out, 'Walk your partners'; 'pace your partners'; 'trot your partners'; and 'gallopade all' again, faster and faster, until the sprained and wind-galled and short stock begin to cave in when he calls out 'Boo!' and throws his hat in the ring.

"A general stampede follows: the gentlemen neigh, curvet, and pitch; the ladies whinny, prance, and kick. Chairs and tables are knocked over, lights blown out, and everybody tumbles over everybody else, till the whole set is piled up in the middle of the room. And so the dance ends."

BORN in Lexington, Virginia, Big Foot Wallace went to Texas in 1836 to avenge the death of his brother and cousin who fell in the battle of San Jacinto. Tall and brawny, well over six feet, Wallace had an arm spread of six feet, six inches. A mop of curly black hair plunged to the sockets of his keen eyes, and a long, hooked nose dipped to a slashed mouth.

En route to Galveston, Wallace and his friend and constant companion, Old Butch, got into a scrape in New Orleans. As Wallace used to say, Old Butch was a mighty keen fellow, for he was a Bowie knife that would serve Big Foot well in his approaching life on the Texas frontier.

In New Orleans, Wallace used Butch to carve a gambler and got thrown in jail, there to await trial. The gambler recovered, however, and friends rescued Wallace who promptly fled.

At Galveston, Wallace moved, fascinated, in the enchanting waterfront world of keels, steamboats, flashboats and dark sailing vessels from the tropics. He thrilled to the swearing, roaring bravado of keelboat men who could drain a pint of whisky at a gulp. He marveled at the Latin sailors who spoke no English, eyed with suspicion the pretty Creole fruit-vending girls and the suave, predatory gamblers in beaver hats.

In the Texas gulf port, Big Foot lived in the abandoned hull of a steamboat that had been established as a hotel. For a bunk, he paid three dollars per day, and he bought his food at one of the six groceries that served the town.

But soon Wallace tired of the confines of even so primitive a city, and he pushed on to the frontier wilderness. He moved to La Grange, then to Austin, and finally, in 1840, to San Antonio where he joined Jack Hays' company of Texas Rangers. He had met the requirements of "courage and good character," and he also owned a "horse worth $100."

As an Indian fighter, Wallace acquired his second intimate friend, "Sweet Lips." Sweet Lips was a muzzle-loading rifle, whose talk was sweet to Wallace, deadly to his enemies.

Sweet Lips accompanied Wallace on all his expeditions where some other companions were far less useful. About to start on a campaign to punish a band of thieving Lipan Indians, Wallace once delayed his caravan for a tenderfoot recruit who was a writer.

"You see, sir," the author explained, "I am writing a work called the 'Wayworn Wanderer of the Western Wilds,' and I need to get some material at first hand."

"Well, naow," Wallace mused, "I reckon I kin wait until tomorrow to give you a chance to outfit. You be here at sunup."

Next morning, just as the sun cracked the arc of the horizon, the author arrived at Wallace's camp. Slung across the writer's shoulders was a double-barreled bird gun. Behind his saddle nestled an umbrella.

"Ain't you got a pistol?" Wallace inquired.

"Certainly," the man replied, fishing out a pea-shooter no larger than Big Foot's big toe. In his anxiety to display his weapon, the author tripped the trigger, sending a pellet whining away into the blue sky. This so startled him, that he continued to pump the trigger, unleashing six shots.

Big Foot's men, howling with delight, dived for cover. "Hobble it," they yelled. "Rope it. Throw it in the creek!" Nobody got hurt which Big Foot accounted a miracle because, as he said, it was one of those guns you

couldn't hit a barn with from the inside if you were aiming but which was bound to kill someone when you were not.

ON THE trail, Wallace and his men "hoorawed" the writer unmercifully. They told him, in reply to his question, that if a rattlesnake should crawl in bed with him at night as he slept on the prairie, he must simply lie still until the snake fell asleep. Then he could get up and bash the reptile to death with a rock.

That night as the writer stretched on his blankets, he felt a reptilian wriggling in the small of his back. At the same time he heard the deadly song of a rattler's castanets.

"Oh, Mr. Wallace," groaned the dude, "what shall I do? There's a snake in bed with me now. I can feel him cuddling against my spine."

Big Foot choked back a laugh. In one hand he held the rattles from a huge diamondback. In the other, he clutched a crooked length of grapevine. Dragging the grapevine against the author's back, Wallace shook the rattles viciously.

"Just lie still," he cautioned.

"Who can lie still," countered the writer, "with sure death staring him in the face, er, in the back, I mean."

Dragging the grapevine again, Wallace began to ask his man about the native haunts of rattlesnakes. "I've heard they're related to the deadly poisonous cobra," he remarked.

"Mr. Wallace, please," moaned the terrified author. "Just tell me how to escape."

"Lie still," Big Foot warned. "I recollect one feller who forgot to lie still. The snake bit him and the poor gent turned black and swelled up like a foundered horse before he died. It was a pitiful sight . . ."

"I can't stand it any longer," sobbed the tenderfoot. "I'm going to jump for it."

Wallace gave the grapevine a vicious twist. Like a stone from a slingshot, the dude whizzed from his bed, landing in the dark some ten feet away. Quickly, Wallace handed him a bottle.

"Drink this," he commanded, "I'm afraid you were bit." The bottle he gave the writer contained liquid chili.

"I'm on fire," yelled the author. "My stomach's full of hot lead. Give me water. Water, man. Water!"

He sat up all night, shaking and drinking from a gourd, convinced that he had experienced a narrow escape.

In 1842, Big Foot Wallace joined Colonel William S. Fisher and a force of three hundred on a punitive expedition to Mexico. Known as the Mier Expedition, these men were the remnants of a company sent to punish the Mexicans for raids against Texas.

At Mier, Fisher's men were persuaded to surrender by superior Mexican forces who started their captives on an overland trek to Mexico City. Along the line of march, women and boys derided the Americans with insults. "Death to the robbers" was a favorite.

At Salado, on March 25, 1843, Wallace and the others stood the test of the bean lottery. Every tenth man was sentenced to die, and his selection determined by whether he could draw a white or a black bean from a hooded pot. The white beans meant life.

Wallace watched sharply as each man before him drew his bean. The officers went first. "Dig deep," Wallace whispered to the first man to pass him. The soldier dug and came up with a white bean. Each man whispered the warning, "Dig deep." All but one of the officers drew white beans. Afterward, Wallace explained that he had noticed the whites were put into the pot first, the blacks dumped in on top and not stirred.

When Wallace stepped to the pot, he spent several minutes fondling beans before withdrawing his hand. "White," he muttered. Turning to give the bean to the Mexican officer in charge, Wallace noticed the man next in line. The poor fellow, beside him-

self with fear, whimpered and shook. Wallace handed him the white bean.

Again Big Foot plunged his hand into the fateful pot. Again he carefully felt the beans. Finally he pulled out his second choice. "White again," he chuckled. Wallace's keen observation had convinced him that the black beans were slightly larger than the white beans.

IT WAS while a prisoner in Castle Perote, in Mexico City, that Wallace earned the nickname, "Big Foot." The Mexican authorities were attempting to outfit the prisoners with shoes, but Wallace's size twelve feet stumped them. Few if any Mexicans ever wore a shoe that large, and the shops had none. In desperation, the jailers called in a cobbler who hand-tooled a pair. This artisan then went out, spreading the story of the Americano with big feet. Wallace's cronies took it up and the nickname stuck.

After his release from Mexico in 1844, Wallace settled in a cabin on the Medina River near San Antonio. In 1850, he again became a Texas Ranger for the balance of the Mexican War. Then, in 1859, he visited his home in Virginia on a well-deserved vacation.

Usually, Wallace decked himself in buckskin suits bedizened with buffalo tags and jingling copper bells. Now he bought himself a complete city wardrobe including a pair of gloves that he wore only once because "they choked my hands so that they made me short-winded."

In New Orleans, Wallace learned to drink "white lions," a potent rum and brandy cocktail; had his pockets picked, losing only a poke containing six-gun bullets and percussion caps; and reinforced his opinion that gentlemen play poker and cutthroat, and swear like mule skinners.

At the St. Charles Tavern, he seated himself at a table where several men and women were waiting breakfast. Casting dark looks at the Texan, one man declared:

"I presume you are under a mistake. This is a private table."

Never dull, Wallace retorted, "Yes, I am. I presumed you were gentlemen." Rising, he added, "And whoever heard of a private table in a public house?" For an instant he fingered Old Butch, thought better of the impulse, and stalked to another table.

For breakfast Wallace had *café au lait,* instead of the quart of black coffee he habitually drank in Texas; and a platter of fried frogs' legs instead of the four or five pounds of roast buffalo meat to which he was accustomed.

Back home in Virginia, Big Foot became known as the "Terrible Texan" for his earthy manners and his salty tall tales. Once at a tea he cornered a good-looking young lady whom he described as "pretty as a pink." "Her teeth," he declared, "were as white as an alligator's, and her eyes were as bright as two mesquite coals. She was a regular knee-weakener."

To this beauty, Big Foot spun a tale of the terrible Santa Fe, a Texas varmint with "a hundred legs and a sting on every one of them, besides two large stings in its forked tails, and fangs as big as a rattlesnake's. When they sting with their legs alone, you might live an hour; when with all their stings, perhaps fifteen minutes; but when they sting and bite at the same time, you first turn blue, then yellow, and then a beautiful bottle-green, then your hair falls out and your fingernails drop off, and you are dead as a doornail in five minutes."

"How on earth," gasped the young lady, "have you managed to escape this creature?"

"Oh," countered Wallace, "I wear tarantula boots of alligator skin and a centipede hunting shirt of tanned rattlesnakes' hides."

The fabulous Texan who could spin such imaginative lies, died in 1899 at the age of eighty-three. Buried with him was Old Butch and Sweet Lips. Living monument to this Texas terror is the modern town of Big Foot in Frio County.

Where our reading and writing waddies get together with POWDER RIVER BILL

RIDIN' up your broncs, pards, and mosey over to Powder River Bill's writin' roundup. Pen-pushers from all over the world are just hommin' to tell you about faraway ranges and the folks who live on them. Hope yourselves some new amigos by sending in your letters to the Stampede department. You'll find plenty of hombres and gals who would like to exchange snapshots, souvenirs, and learn about your hobbies.

And, too, Powder River Bill wants to savvy the type of yarns you cotton to, so that you can read them in WESTERN TRAILS. Don't fail to state the names of your favorite authors to insure your getting tophand stories of the brand you prefer. You'll be interested in this month's lineup of writin' rannyhans.

Calling all pen pards.

Dear Bill:

I have read WESTERN TRAILS for a good many years and like it very much.

I would like to be a pen pal. I'm five feet, eight inches tall, have brown hair and brown eyes, a ruddy complexion, and I weigh about 140 pounds. My age is twenty-seven, and I would like to hear from people between the ages of nineteen and twenty-eight. I have traveled in many countries and have several hobbies.

Please let me hear from you and let me be a pen pal. I enjoy reading the *Stampede* page and WESTERN TRAILS stories.

Thank you.

Sincerely yours,

HENRY W. MARRITT
116 W. 8th Ave.
Gloversville, N. Y.

Some letters will cheer her up.

Dear Bill:

Hi, everyone! With all the other boys and girls on the bunkhouse bulletin, I hope there's still room for me. I have blond hair, dark brown eyes, fair complexion, and am nineteen years old, five feet, three inches tall.

I like all sports, my favorite being horseback riding and dancing. As for reading, WESTERN TRAILS is my favorite magazine. I only wish it were a bigger book.

I promise to answer all letters and will exchange pictures. So come on, pen pals—young or old—please write to me. I get terribly lonesome and letters really cheer me up. I've never seen a letter from Kokomo in the *Stampede* so I hope mine will make the grade.

Sincerely,

EDITH HINSON
R.R. 2, Box 159
Kokomo, Ind.

PARDNER PETE'S Bunkhouse Bulletin

Pen Pards who would like an ink sketch of their snapshot send it to—

DAVID JEROME
539 Brompton Place
Chicago, Ill.

Pen Pards who would like poetry written about their picture send it to—

CHARLES J. HERBERT, JR.
c/o Victor St. James
Whittemore, Michigan

—and—

STANLEY C. DeCAMP
c/o Gen'l Delivery, Galion, Ohio

Please be her pen pal.

Dear Bill:

My girl friend recently gave me two copies of WESTERN TRAILS and I was greatly attracted to your *Stampede* section. I am fifteen years old, five feet tall, with black hair and brown eyes.

My hobbies are horseback riding, swimming, ice skating, and bicycle riding. I also like to dance.

I will answer all letters sent to me and exchange pictures with anyone wishing to do so. Please be my pen pal. Thanks.

IRENE FERGUS
333 Randolph St.
Windsor, Ont.
Canada

Photography is his hobby.

Dear Bill:

My first attempt failed to make the *Stampede*, but I hope this time I make the grade. WESTERN TRAILS has helped me pass away quite a few dull evenings, both at sea and on land.

I have blond hair, blue eyes, and I weigh 179 pounds. I am six feet tall, and twenty-six years old. I am in an Army hospital at the present time, but I will be discharged by the time your next mag is published.

All outdoor sports are favorites with me. Photography and radio are my hobbies.

I promise to answer all letters, and I'll be glad to exchange snaps. I hope you print this letter, Bill, as I sure would like some pen pals.

EDWARD J. HORST
6224 So. Wood St.
Chicago 36, Ill.

A real dyed-in-the-wool cowpoke.

Dear Bill:

I'm a Westerner by birth, by rearing, and by choice. I am also a reader of WESTERN TRAILS which I found to be one of the best in the field. Your writers seem to have an interesting story to tell and the ability to tell it interestingly.

I'm just another of those guys who has spent a lot of time with the cattle on the Western range. I'd be glad to receive letters from far and wide, and would answer willingly and as interestingly as possible.

KARL HAYER
c/o H. H. Brown
Box 222
Beaver, Okla.

Adios, amigos—till next time.

An' listen, folks, don't forget to send in your ballots. Here's the ballot. Just mark "1"—"2"—"3"—"4"—an' so on, in the order of your likin'.

Tophand Author's Ballot

WESTERN TRAILS
23 West 47th Street New York, N. Y.

CLIFTON ADAMS *One Against a Gunhawk Horde*	___
JOSEPH COMMINGS *The Law in Lynch Town*	___
JOE ARCHIBALD *Bum Steer from Arizona*	___
STEVE HAIL *Mustang Musketeer*	___
G. H. WILLIAMS *All Aboard for Boot Hill!*	___
RAY GAULDEN *Black Sheep Bravado*	___
NAT McKELVEY *The Terrible Texan*	___
WALKER A. TOMPKINS *Swing the Hangrope High!*	___

Name .....

Address .....

For the protection of our readers, WESTERN TRAILS reserves the right to open all Pen Pard mail passing through our hands.

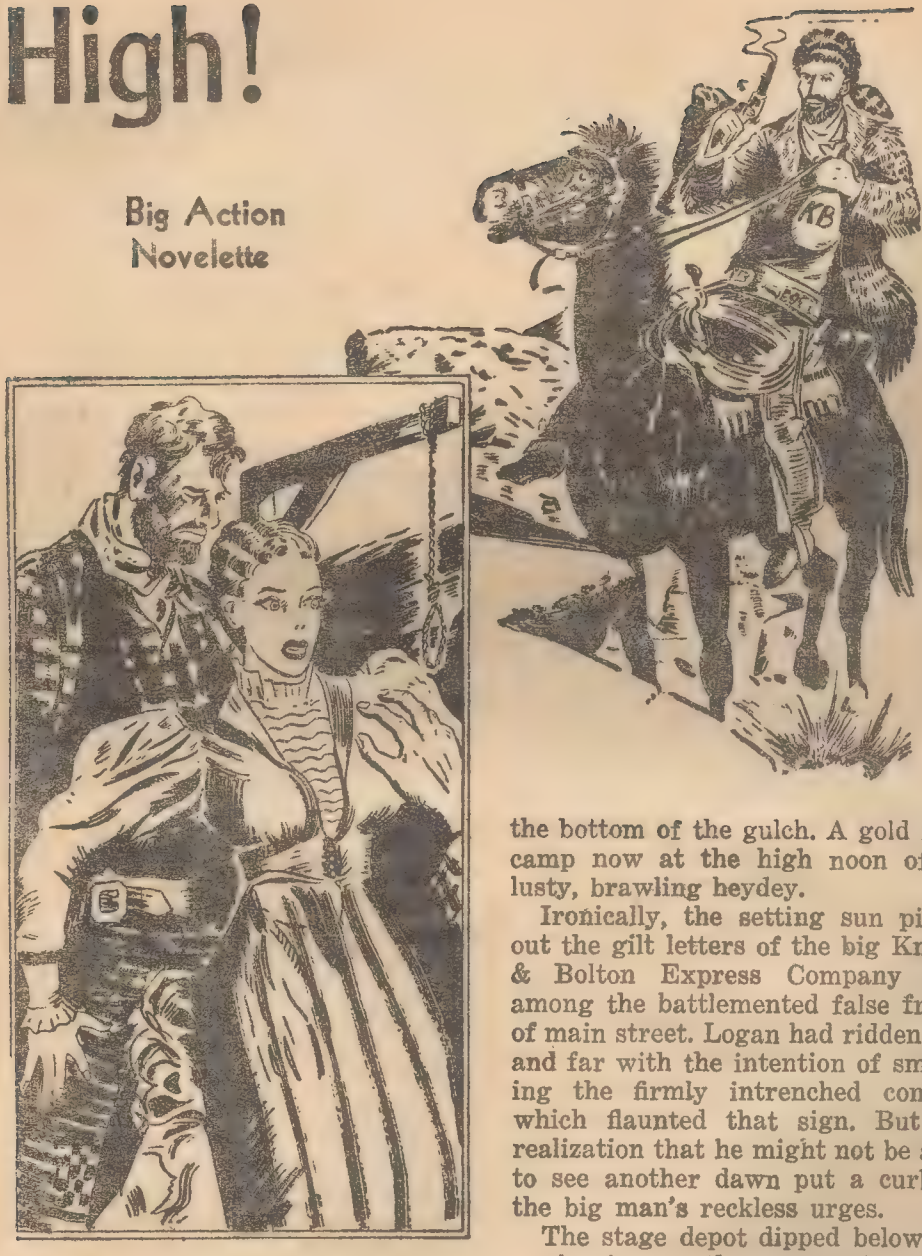
Swing the Hangrope

By Walker A. Tompkins

In self-defense, Grat Logan unknowingly gunned down the man he'd sworn to kill—and rode into a hangrope party for an hombre who was accused of Grat's own crime.

High!

Big Action Novelette



CHAPTER I

THE pressure of seething hatreds which had driven Grat Logan out of Wyoming became an intolerable thing as he gigged the steelduster over the crown of the ridge and saw the end of a manhunt trail below him. Alder City, Montana: a shabby double row of tents and log huts and unpainted frames, hugging the bottom of the gulch. A gold rush camp now at the high noon of its lusty, brawling heydey.

Ironically, the setting sun picked out the gilt letters of the big Knight & Bolton Express Company sign among the battlemented false fronts of main street. Logan had ridden fast and far with the intention of smashing the firmly intrenched concern which flaunted that sign. But the realization that he might not be alive to see another dawn put a curb on the big man's reckless urges.

The stage depot dipped below Logan's view as the intervening roofs of canvas and tarpaper, cedar shakes and rusty tin lifted to meet his horse's careful descent of the ridge. His arrival here was roundabout by intention, as could be expected for a man carrying a price on his head and forty-odd pounds of stolen gold on his person.

Over in the Tobacco Root foothills two nights back, Logan had fashioned

a special vest, lined with big pockets for the individual leather pokes, out of the canvas lining of the buffalo coat he had used in the stagecoach holdup beyond the Beaverhead. Each of those pokes bore the K & B brand of their custodian once removed: the Knight & Bolton Express Company, which linked these Alder Gulch diggings with Bannack City and Lewiston.

Logan rode into Alder City knowing that news of the five-day-old robbery had preceded him here, that the camp would be alerted, suspicious of strangers. Knight & Bolton could absorb the loss of the gold shipment easily enough. What would concern the camp most was that the lone bandit had liquidated the president of K & B by depositing one ounce of hot lead in Ben Knight's heart.

Pure mischance had put Knight on one of his own stages, bound for Bannack City; the Concord had thus become his hearse. It was ironic that Knight should have thus ridden to meet the man sworn to kill him; more ironic still that the bandit had slain in self-defense, not knowing the identity of his victim.

Hitching his mount to a lodgepole snag in the rear of a wheelwright's shop, Logan headed up an alley toward the main street. Out of saddle, he stood six feet six without the added loft of his Wyoming cowboots and flat-crowned Stetson, an extraordinarily big man in a raw land where big men were the rule.

As such, Logan had the outsize breadth of shoulders to disguise the fact that he was wearing a grotesquely thick-padded vest under his black oilskin saddle slicker.

Logan knew surprise, but no particular trepidation, when he found himself sucked into the churning tide of humanity which which blocked Alder City's single street, directly in front of the K & B stage stand. There was safety for a hunted man in a crowd such as this one. The anonymity which came of mingling with this mob of bewhiskered, red-shirted and muddy-booted miners was something to be desired, until he could get his bearings and locate the man he had come to Alder City to kill.

SOMETHING unusual must be afoot in town this evening, to account for this milling throng. Logan had not expected such turmoil in a supposedly peaceful mining camp, which had been thoroughly purged of its criminal element several months before by the ruthless law-and-order campaign of the Montana vigilantes.

Logan recalled his brother Jerry's letters, describing life in this camp only a short year ago. No miner with an ounce of dust in his poke was safe, in those days when Henry Plummer's organized legion of cutthroats—the dread "Innocents"—laid their reign of terror up and down the length of Alder Creek. But the vigilantes were supposed to have ended all that by the judicious use of hangrope and kangaroo court.

Logan grabbed the arm of a man next to him whose apron marked him for a bartender, and therefore a fertile source of local news.

"What's the ruckus about, friend?"

The saloonman bent Logan a brief, incurious glance.

"Why, they brought Cy Keefer in from the mountings to stand trial for murder, stranger. Overmile's vigilantes want he should have a jury trial, but the muckers are hollerin' for a lynchin' and no red-tape nonsense."

Buffeted by the excited throng, Logan ascertained that the focal point of this gathering was in the person of an unusually tall, spare-boned man of Lincolnian aspect, whose arms were lashed behind his back with rawhide thongs. The prisoner was standing on the elevated porch of the K & B stagecoach depot, overlooking the crowd with limpid, melancholy eyes.

Behind this unfortunate Cy Keefer

was massed a solid phalanx of stern-looking men bearing shotguns and Henry rifles, obviously a guard. At Keefer's side, one arm encircling his waist, stood a girl in the full bloom of young womanhood. She was Keefer's daughter, without question; her high-stacked coils of auburn hair matched the prisoner's curly red beard too exactly for coincidence, and her eyes were the same shade of cerulean blue as Keefer's, but red-rimmed and swollen from recent weeping.

A lull gathered over the clamoring crowd as a white-bearded man in a green Keevil hat and flowered waistcoat stepped forward from the ranks of the armed guards, halting beside Keefer. Obviously, this last was a man of considerable importance in the diggings; his commanding personality was given added authority by the law badge pinned to the lapel of his fustian clawhammer coat.

"Gentlemen, your attention!" implored the star-toter, lifting his arms toward the buttermilk-clouded sky. "As duly elected chief of your vigilante committee, I feel it my duty to point out that this case, involving a citizen of Cy Keefer's unquestioned standing in the camp, demands more than a mere drumhead hearing and a hasty hanging—"

Amid a cacophony of "Lynch him!" "To hell with a trial!" "Ain't you got the deadwood on the son?" a burly jackleg mucker close beside Grat Logan raised a gnarled fist and shook it in the direction of the speaker.

"Were you so finicky about speedy justice when you helped round up the Innocents last winter, Gid Overmile?" challenged the prospector. "What if Keefer *is* a trusted citizen o' this camp? What about Henry Plummer, the sheriff over at Bannack? Folks trusted *him*—an' he turned out to be the kingpin of the wild bunch!"

Gid Overmile waited patiently until the throng's roar of approval had spent itself, "Let me remind you," the vigilante chief called out, "that there is some reason to doubt that Cyrus Keefer was the road agent who robbed the Bannack stage last week and murdered Ben Knight. Keefer's alibi that he was out deer huntin' in the Tobacco Roots at the time of that holdup has been substantiated by Miss Rosalind here."

Grat Logan felt a cold wave of emotion brush aside the stolid indifference he had felt toward the condemned man.

By some fantastic mischance, Keefer stood accused of a killing which Logan had committed! No longer was he a mere outsider, an onlooker to this savage drama which gripped Alder City.

However deep his motives for vengeance against the Knight & Bolton monopoly, Logan was not prepared for the development that now confronted him—an innocent man charged with his guilt. Suddenly the solid dragging weight of his loot-filled vest became a menacing pressure over his heart, millstones of destiny that seemed to be dragging him toward hell.

"Enough o' that talk, Gid!" roared the miner beside Logan, starting to plow a path through the crowd with his elbows. "There ain't a man in this camp who'd blame Rozzie Keefer for lyin' to save her dad from a hangrope. But life was sweet to Ben Knight, too. An' it was our hard-earned gold Keefer stole."

Grat Logan found himself being buffeted in the miner's wake by the closing in of bodies hemming him about. He was close enough to touch Cy Keefer's boots now, close enough to see the steady pulse beats in Keefer's skinny neck, to see the hard-leashed panic in the prisoner's rheumy blue eyes. Even in the shadow of death's black wings, Keefer was putting up a brave front of it.

During a momentary hush following the spokesman's retort to the vigilante chieftain, Keefer cleared his

throat and his vibrant words rang out across the sea of hostile faces.

"You all know me, gentlemen. I founded the Bonanza Mercantile when Virginia City and Adobetown and Alder here were hardly staked out. Nobody ever challenged my integrity or impeached my character before this. I—"

The prospector's broad back was directly in front of Grat Logan now, as he shook a clubbed fist up at the prisoner.

"You deny you hated Ben Knight's guts, Cy? You deny you threatened to kill him once? You deny the Mercantile ain't goin' broke fast, that you needed money bad?"

Keefer glanced down, his eyes sliding off Grat Logan's red-bearded face as he searched for the owner of the accusing voice, knowing it was the mouthpiece for the crowd's thinking.

"I do not deny my hatred of the late Mr. Knight," Keefer acknowledged bluntly. "Any father would have felt the same toward a four-flusher who used my girl's name in a saloon as Knight did. But I didn't kill Knight, regardless of how the evidence stands. I am innocent, George Callahan. Before God, I—"

Callahan, the barrel-chested miner, scrambled up on the stagecoach station porch and wheeled to face the crowd. Logan perceived that this Callahan was more than a little drunk.

"You hear that, boys?" Callahan thundered triumphantly. "'I am Innocent!' he says. That was the password of Sheriff Plummer's gang, wasn't it? The vigilantes was organized to wipe out the Innocents. They hung the ringleaders, drove off the weaklings. I say that Cy Keefer is one o' the gang that ain't been smoked out into the open until now!"

The crowd surged angrily forward, crushing Grat Logan against the stringers of the Knight & Bolton porch. In common with would-be lynch mobs, this inflammatory lust to kill was fast reaching the explosive point here.

Logan thought, *I'm the only man who can save Keefer's bacon.* His palms moved across his ribs, feeling the bulk of the gold pokes reposing in the many compartments of the canvas vest under his shielding oilskin slicker. *This gold would exonerate Keefer—and put my neck in this mob's lynch noose!*

CHAPTER II

GIDEON OVERMILE halted the threatening surge of miners toward the stage depot's porch by signaling the men behind him to ready their guns.

"There have been no lynchings in Alder Gulch since the vigilantes were organized here," Overmile shouted through the gathering dusk. "My vigilantemen will defend this man until he has been proved guilty. Let's not have any bloodshed until the accused has been granted a legal trial —by an impartial jury."

A vigilanteman stepped out of the ranks to take his place beside Overmile—a big-chested Alder Gulcher whose hairy face was blemished by an ugly strawberry blotch across his left cheek, looking like an unhealed scar.

"That will be Ezra Bolton," ran the swift thought, like a naked flame, through Grat Logan's brain. "Jerry mentioned that birthmark in the next to the last letter I got from him."

Ezra Bolton, co-partner of the dead Ben Knight and now sole owner of the Bannack City and Lewiston stage lines, raised his arms for quiet.

"One thing you boys are overlookin'," Bolton said grimly. "Which is that Knight & Bolton stand to lose that ten thousand in gold dust and nuggets. Keefer was too smart to be caught with his loot on him. Once he's hung, you men'll never know what gopher hole Keefer rammed

your pokes into. Think that over!"

Grat Logan felt a nauseous sensation assail the pit of his belly. That missing gold dust was within six feet of where Ez Bolton stood now. Gold which held the key to Keefer's freedom and Logan's death by hanging.

"We'll handle it this way, men!" Gid Overmile pursued the opening which Bolton's words had made in the crowd's thought. "Let Cyrus Keefer be judged by a jury of total strangers. Men without prejudice in this case. Outsiders who have no reason either to hate or to respect the accused. Which rules out any member of my vigilante committee. Is that American enough for you? Isn't that fair?"

The crowd, which a moment before had been demanding a forthright lynching, swung around to support Overmile's vigilantes now. Rounding up twelve strangers would not be hard in Alder City, which had a heavy percentage of floating population at all times—transient gamblers, down on their luck miners, mule skinners and trappers and tenderfeet.

"Agreed?" yelled Overmile. "Fine. Our first man will be—"

The vigilante's glance dropped to the crowd, searching the whiskered faces there, and came to rest on the man nearest him: Grat Logan. He leveled a finger like a pistol barrel at the Wyoming rider's upturned face.

"You, there, stranger! Do you know the defendant here?"

Logan shook his head. "Never laid eyes on the man before, sir."

Overmile squatted down on his boot heels. "Ever know Ben Knight, the man Keefer is accused of killing during a stagecoach holdup over on the Beaverhead last week?"

Logan shrugged. "Not personally. I'm running cattle down in the Bighorn country. I've heard of Knight & Bolton, of course."

Overmile reached down to grip Logan's hand. "Then you're juryman number one!" the vigilante chief shouted, for the crowd's benefit. "Eleven to go. Who's next?"

LOGAN found himself pulled up to the level of the porch floor and shoved back behind Cyrus Keefer, who bent an indifferent glance toward this man who matched his incredible height to the inch. A subtle scent of perfume reminded Logan of Rosalind Keefer's presence beside him, and his lips moved behind his curly red beard.

"Don't you worry, ma'am. Your father'll get an acquittal out of this. I'll guarantee you that."

A canvas tent opposite the stage depot, bearing the sign, *Midget Saloon—Best Whisky in the Territory*, had been commandeered by the vigilantes to serve as a courtroom, immediately after the twelve jurors had been publicly sworn in.

Grat Logan and his eleven companions sat atop the scrubbed deal counter which served as the Midget's bar, their heads touching the patched canvas roof of the deadfall. Even in these sordid surroundings, the majesty of legal jurisprudence gave these dozen men an Olympian aloofness, the outward appearance of law and order.

Ezra Bolton was acting as prosecutor, pacing up and down the rammed earth floor of the saloon between the jury and the two baize-covered poker tables which served Gideon Overmile, the judge, as a bar of justice. Cyrus Keefer and his daughter sat behind the second table, the defendant's arms still trussed behind his back.

"I'll summarize the case against the accused as brief as possible," Bolton rumbled, his strawberry birthmark standing out lividly in the glare of the lantern which hung from the saloon's ridgepole. "A masked road agent, wearin' a buffler coat and a coontail cap and bandanna mask, stopped one of my stages just after

it crossed the Beaverhead on Wednesday last.

"He forced my driver to toss down the express box, which was carryin' roughly $10,000 in gold for deposit in our vault in Bannack City. He searched the passengers, but didn't attempt to rob 'em. But these passengers seen him at close range, and have already testified that the bandit had a curly red beard, and stood the same height as Cy Keefer."

Four witnesses, passengers on the ill-fated stagecoach who had been returned here from Bannack City to testify, had left the tent a few minutes previously, joining the restless crowd out on the night-shrouded street.

"The witnesses," Bolton continued, "have seen the coonskin cap and buffler coat which now rest on the judge's table here. They are the costume that was worn by the stage robber—"

Rosalind Keefer jumped to her feet, eyes blazing angrily, to speak in her father's defense. Logan saw that Keefer was listening to the entire proceedings with the vacuous look of a man resigned to the inevitable.

"I object, Your Honor!" cried the girl shrilly. "Mr. Bolton's witnesses knew that cap and coat belong to Dad. We haven't denied that. But Mr. Bolton didn't prove that they are the same garments worn by the hold-up man!"

Gideon Overmile rapped on the poker table with a beer bottle which served as a judicial gavel.

"Objection sustained," rumbled the vigilante judge. "This buffalo coat and coonskin cap were admitted in evidence, Mr. Bolton, on the grounds that they were identical in *appearance* to those worn by the bandit. As I pointed out to you, Mr. Bolton, you could find a dozen buffalo coats and coon caps in that crowd outside, this very minute. That type of dress is pretty common around here."

TURNING to the jurymen, Bolton favored them with a grin meant to imply that he had scored a vital point against Keefer.

"All right," he went on. "Among those riding in the Bannack stage that day was my partner, Ben Knight. The bandit took Ben's belt gun, but overlooked the derringer concealed under his right sleeve. As the bandit was backing off into the brush, Ben risked his life to drop the miscreant with the one shot at his disposal. He missed. The bandit knew Ben's gun was empty, but he murdered Ben none the less."

Grat Logan stirred restlessly on the bar. Bolton—either through ignorance of the real facts, or with intent to make Knight's killing seem cold-blooded—had not revealed that the weapon involved was an Allen pepperbox pistol, chambered for six shots. True, Knight had opened fire at his retreating back. Logan had killed the stranger in self-defense—only to learn from a rider who passed his camp in the Tobacco Roots three days later that his victim had been one of the two men he had sworn to kill.

"That's about the sum of it, gentlemen of the jury," Bolton wound up his summation. "The witnesses are morally certain it was Cy Keefer behind that bandanna. The posse from Bannack trailed the robber into the Tobacco Roots, found Keefer and his girl camped there . . ."

Bolton strode over to the whisky jug at the front end of the tent and sat down. Judge Overmile turned toward the Keefers and addressed the lanky trader gently.

"Let's have your side of the story, Cy."

Cyrus Keefer got stiffly to his feet, eyeing the jury man by man. His voice held the bleak resignation of a man who knew he was doomed before he started.

"My character as a law-abiding citizen of Alder City is my chief de-

fense," he said. "Being strangers, you wouldn't know about that. The posse found Rozzie and myself camped in the foothills of the Tobacco Root mountains, yes. It is my custom, every fall, to go deer hunting. At the time of Knight's murder, Rozzie and I were fifty miles away, hunting mule tails. My daughter has already sworn to that alibi, under oath."

Keefer made a tired gesture toward the buffalo coat and coonskin cap resting on the table in front of Overmile.

"The coincidence that I was dressed similarly to this bandit is the flimsiest kind of circumstantial evidence against me. The fact that the posse from Bannack City found no trace of the stolen gold cannot be construed as evidence of guilt, but rather as proof of my innocence."

Contrary to established rules of judicial procedure, Ezra Bolton came storming back into the glare of lamplight.

"What you ain't mentioned, Keefer," he thundered, "is that you've more than once threatened to kill Ben Knight—for tryin' to make love to your daughter. You also haven't mentioned that Bonanza Mercantile is near bankruptcy, that you needed that ten thousand the worst way."

In the following quiet after Overmile had ordered the jury to disregard Bolton's last statements, Rosalind's voice came in a tragic whisper:

"Bonanza Mercantile is nearly broke, yes. Because my dad extends credit to any mucker who is down on his luck. Half the men in Alder Gulch have been grubstaked at one time or another by Cyrus Keefer—the same brutes who are now crying for his life out on the street tonight."

GRAT LOGAN'S oilskin slicker made a rustling noise as he eased his ponderous bulk off the bar counter, leaving a gap in the row of tense jurymen.

Overmile called out sharply: "Back where you were, stranger. I'll clear this courtroom in order that you jurymen can deliberate your verdict. Until I do, stay where you are."

Grat Logan's scrubby red beard hid the hard fixture of his mouth corners as he ignored the judge, walking over toward the defense table, his eyes meeting Rosalind's. His look said *I promised you an acquittal. Now I'm making good.*

Turning to face the judge, the man from Wyoming spoke in clipped accents: "Keefer here is not guilty, Your Honor. I aim to prove that to your satisfaction."

As he spoke, Logan unsnapped his slicker and shrugged it off, to reveal his oddly bulging canvas vest buttoned over a cowpuncher's hickory shirt. Lamplight glinted off the curved stock of the .44 Dragoon holstered at his right flank.

Overmile came to his feet, staring as Logan unbuttoned the canvas vest and tossed it in front of Keefer. The eleven members of the jury leaned from the bar like a row of gargoyles, sensing high drama in the tension which flowed through the tent.

With calm deliberation, Logan reached inside the vest and brought a plump buckskin sack out of one of the pockets, a sack bearing the familiar K & B brand. He tossed the gold poke over to Overmile's table.

"Yes, gentlemen — the missing loot!" Grat Logan said. "You'll find my buffalo coat and coon cap stashed in the rocks over in Raphahoe canyon."

For a full ten seconds, the tableau in the Midgit Saloon held its petrified posture, as immobile as a photograph.

Taking advantage of this calculated surprise, Grat Logan slid the Dragoon from holster and backed swiftly toward the wind-bellied rear wall of the tent, his free hand easing a bowie blade from its sheath at his thigh.

The frozen hypnosis which gripped

the spectators was broken by the soft ripping sound of Logan's razor-whetted bowie cutting a long slit in the canvas wall. Eyes tore free of the gold-laden vest and swung around to glimpse the erstwhile juryman stepping through the hole in the tent to vanish in the night.

Directly behind Logan, the steep brushy slope of Alder Gulch offered refuge for a man in flight. Instead, Logan side-stepped to the corner of the tent, just as pandemonium broke loose inside.

"It was him that killed Knight, then—"

Ezra Bolton's bawling voice was followed by a brace of gunshots, and Logan saw the grotesque shadows of the jurymen leaving the bar and heading toward the rear of the tent.

Taking advantage of the bedlam inside, Logan worked his way down the side wall of the tent, carefully stepping over taut pegged ropes, heading toward the main street.

Guns roared harshly inside the tent as belated bullets riddled the canvas wall on either side of the slit marking the route of Logan's exit. A moment later Grat heard a stampede of boots as the makeshift courtroom was emptied, men pouring out through the ruptured back walls, ears keening the upper slope of Alder Gulch for the sound of escaping feet.

CHAPTER III

STOOPING between two tent ropes, Logan cut a second slash with his knife, opening the vertical wall of the tent from ground to eave. A moment later he was wedging his shoulders back inside the smoke-fouled tent, to find himself in the deep shadows of the alley behind the bar counter.

Coming erect, he saw Rosalind Keefer engaged in the business of unknotting her father's bonds. Old Cy was still staring at the gold-laden canvas vest, which the vigilante jury had left lying on the poker table.

A swift raking glance up and down the saloon revealed no trace of jurymen or judge. All had followed Bolton out into the night in search of the vanished stranger.

The two Keefers started violently as Logan vaulted the bar and sheathed his gun and bowie. He was grinning confidently as he walked over to them and shucked his arms through the holes of the vest, buttoning it over his massive chest. His black oilskins lay boot-trampled and ruined on the hard-packed earthen floor.

"No use leaving my loot," he chuckled. "Not that I wouldn't have gladly sacrificed it, Mr. Keefer, to keep you from hanging for a sin of mine."

Outdoors, a roar of sound was swelling along the packed street in front of the Midgit. The news was out that Knight's actual killer was now at large. A matter of seconds and the sensational details of what had broken up the jury trial would be known to the mob. Then the Midgit Saloon would become the mecca of curious hordes of miners.

While Rosalind and her father stared speechless, Grat Logan reached up to extinguish the lantern. As darkness closed in, he felt Rosalind Keefer's hands gripping his sleeve. She was pressing a cold metallic object into his fingers.

"You — you can't stay here," the girl cried desperately. "This is the key to the back door of our warehouse. The Bonanza Mercantile is five doors up-gulch from this tent. You'll be safe in our store."

There was no time to thank the girl for her quick thinking on his behalf; no time to give the explanations which Logan suddenly felt he owed this girl and her father. Even yet, Cyrus Keefer could not realize that his neck had been saved from the noose.

"Go—hurry!" the girl's voice reached his ears. "Out in that crowd you'll escape attention."

In the darkness he felt the girl's palms press cool against his whiskered cheeks, felt her pull his head down and crush her lips momentarily to his. Then she was pushing him toward the front fly of the saloon.

He shouldered through the canvas into the confusion and turmoil of running men. Bodies buffeted him as he turned up-gulch in the direction of Keefer's trading post—men joining the manhunt which, logically enough under the circumstances, was being directed into the jackpine scrub on the hillslope behind the Midgit.

Beyond the near hangtree, Alder City's main street was a river of shuttering light, cast by the coal-oil flares which smoked and guttered in their brackets before honkies and deadfalls. Logan moved into that lighted area with suspense putting its sharp edge against him for the first time.

BACK in the tent-courtroom, he had gambled on surprise covering his swift getaway. Now, his outsize build was against him; even without his slicker, the crowd would know him. The word was surely out by now that the man who had dropped the bombshell before the vigilante court was the man who had been the first to be empaneled on Overmile's jury. A thousand pairs of eyes had seen him sworn in at sundown; a thousand potential chances that his rolling gait and giant build would be recognized in the bedlam.

Keefer's place was a long false front with log walls, conspicuous because of its windows were dark. Heading toward it, Logan saw the first backwash of the manhunt as the alleys disgorged rivers of men doubling back from their fruitless search of the ridge slope.

"No trace of his sign up the slope," came a shout Logan recognized as that of the judge, Gideon Overmile. "He's somewhere here along the street, men."

Passing an alley, Logan could hear the movement of hunters crashing through the brush above the level of the gulch-bottom roofs. He knew that Bolton's cordon of bounty hunters was doubling back toward the street now.

As he reached the alley alongside Keefer's trading post, his big shape silhouetted in the flare of kerosene torches on a further saloon awning, Logan heard the stentorian bawl of Ezra Bolton as the express boss raced up the plank walk behind him.

"That's him! The big feller—"

Logan whirled like a wolf at bay, palming his Colt. A shotgun close by roared deafeningly and he heard the lethal passage of swarming shot as it peppered the corner of the trading post, the buckshot pattern missing him by a scant margin.

Logan faded into the alley's shadowy maw as he saw men racing toward him from all angles. He picked out Ez Bolton's charging figure and laid his first shot toward the stageline boss, saw Bolton sprawl headlong, losing his grip on a smoking gun. Whether the slug had tallied Bolton or whether Bolton had stumbled on the uneven walk, he could not be sure.

Logan's original intention had been to work his way to the wheelwright's shop where his steeldust gelding, now rested, would be waiting. But that avenue of escape was blocked now, thanks to Bolton's alarm.

Men were racing up the black alley behind him. Logan flattened his big shoulders against the log wall to make room for that rush, knowing the confusion was his best cover.

Then, his cow boots churning the mud, Logan bent low and sprinted toward the rear of the alley.

Bolton was not killed, probably not wounded. Logan could hear the stage owner's shout coming out of the blackness to overtake him, as Bolton directed the pursuit down the black maw of the alley.

Behind Logan, the alley was blocked from wall to wall with sure targets; but he held his fire. He had no stomach for downing men against whom he had no personal score to settle, men spurred on by Bolton's shouted offers of a gold bounty to the man who tallied him.

Logan felt the cold pressure of the night wind against his face and knew by that that he had reached the end of the Keefer building. Once more he had the hillslope ahead of him. To the right and left were the back ends of Alder City's ramshackle buildings, curving off and away to follow the contours of the gulch.

He ducked around the corner of Keefer's trading post, smelling the acrid sting of the powdersmoke which was still spilling from the muzzle of the Dragoon in his fist. As he stumbled headlong on a sloping barrier of adzed logs, he realized that this was the ramp which freight wagons used in gaining the rear platform behind Keefer's warehouse.

MOUNTING the ramp, Logan slid his left hand along the whipsawed board and batten wall of the annex until he felt the delivery entrance under his fingertips. In the stygian gloom, Logan could only guess where the padlock would be. Men were already rounding the corner of the alley ten yards behind him when he encountered the cold metal of the lock.

"You, up front — bring lights!" yelled Ezra Bolton, somewhere at the foot of the ramp. "He can't be far—"

Answering Bolton's call, someone was bringing a torch or a lantern down the alley, sending the outlandish shadows of Logan's pursuers wagging against the hillside brush.

For the moment, Bolton's men were as blind as he was. Once the light came behind the building's corner, he would be picked out on the platform like a sitting duck, sure target for a point-blank sleet of lead.

Logan fought to control the tremor in his fingers as he slid Rosalind's key into the padlock, felt it snap open.

Someone opened fire with a six-gun, shooting at random down the black length of Keefer's building. In the act of jerking the padlock from its hasp, Logan heard bullets chew into the wood, sharply ricochet off a nailhead.

He trundled the warehouse door open and was lifting his leg to step into the sheltering darkness of the building when an irresistible force smashed him in the back and knocked him headlong against the doorjamb.

He fell inside the warehouse, a numb sensation going through him, his wind knocked from his lungs. A bullet had struck him in the back, that he knew. He wondered vaguely if it had snapped his spine.

Men armed with a lighted lantern were storming up the ramp's incline as Logan rolled over on the warehouse floor and slid the door shut with a spurred heel.

The lantern sent out wheeling pencils of light through nail holes and cracks, giving Logan a pinched-off glimpse of boxes and bales of merchandise tiered ghostily around him.

As the lantern bearer neared the warehouse door, a vagrant beam of light shafting through a knothole showed Logan a big iron ringbolt set in the doorjamb, and the shank of a corresponding iron hook alongside it, attached to the door.

He heard hands pawing at the door handle and a despairing sense of urgency brought the dazed man to his feet, sucking air into his jarred lungs.

Moving without conscious volition, Logan seized the interior door hook and thrust it into the doorjamb ringbolt, a shaved instant before the door shook violently as the men outside tested it.

"Locked on the inside," Ezra Bolton panted, as the other men gath-

ered around the lantern bearer. "Scatter both directions, men. A man that big can't just vanish."

For the first time, Logan realized he still had the big padlock gripped in his sweat-rinsed palm. If he had left that damning evidence outside on the platform, they would be storming his hideout now.

"No way of knowing which way he ducked," a snarling voice rang out, separated from Logan only by the inch-thick boards of the sliding door. "Scout along under the foundations here, men. Rickshaft and O'Connor, head up-gulch for another look behind them saloons. Hill and Mohr and Philip, check the windows of Belknapp's Casino next door. We know for sure he come down this alley."

Logan's muscles eased their intolerable tension as he heard the men leaving the platform. Lamplight winked through cracks under the puncheon floor at his feet, as Bolton's posse scouted the forest of foundation timbers under the warehouse.

A soft, unidentifiable sound, like spilling sand, reached his ears. A stray beam of light piercing a hole in the floor revealed a thin, cascading stream of yellow metal particles trickling down the length of his leg, like grains spilling from a broken hourglass.

Groping a hand around the back of his vest, Logan knew the answer to his own escape. A wild slug, triggered at no particular target by some jittery manhunter, had struck one of the filled pokes of gold dust in a pocket of his vest. It had been the impact of that bullet which had dumped Logan off his feet, providentially tumbling him into the warehouse doorway.

Gold dust worth twenty dollars to the troy ounce was cascading from the ruptured poke now. Without this bulletproof garment he had recovered from the *Midgit*, Bolton's men would have found him lying with a bullet in his back, outside Keefer's door. And they would have deduced where he had obtained the key to the warehouse padlock quickly enough.

Logan groped his way through sightless dark, his nostrils identifying the myriad odors of this place. Spices and woolen goods, grain and oil, coffee beans and brine—all the assorted merchandise which Bonanza stocked to supply a mining camp's needs.

Edging along a mound of sacked grain piled from floor to rafters, Logan saw the shine of street lights through a window out front, made out the rectangular opening of a door which connected this annex to Keefer's store facing the street.

He found an enclosure between a pile of boxes and the grain sacks which appeared to be part of a bale of miner's blankers, and he settled himself to wait out the night and the eventual arrival of the Keefers.

CHAPTER IV

SOMEWHERE out front, a clock ticked loudly. He heard it strike the hours of eleven, and an eternity later, midnight. Gradually the sound of pandemonium left Alder City, outside; the mining camp had given up the manhunt and had settled down to its usual baudy nocturnal diversions.

A freighter's jerkline string rumbled by outside, its passage trembling the walls. Tinpanny music came from a hurdy-gurdy house across the street. Somewhere far off he heard a mule bray, and was reminded of the horse he had left hitched behind the wheelwright's shop upon his arrival in town.

By degrees, Alder City went quiet. A drunken miner fired a few sporadic shots at the Montana stars; horsemen galloped past on the Bannack road.

The clock in the store out front chimed three o'clock before Logan heard footsteps on the front porch,

and a key grated in the lock of Keefer's sheet-iron door. Logan came erect, realizing that he had been asleep. He had missed the striking of two.

Hand tense on gun butt, he listened as the trading post door squealed open on unoiled hinges. Then he relaxed as he heard the rustle of a girl's skirts and recognized the tall, lank shape of the man he had saved from lynch-rope doom tonight.

The door clicked shut and Logan heard the sound of a heavy bolt being shot into its socket. Then Keefer and his daughter moved across the store, with the sure confidence which long familiarity with their surroundings gave them.

Logan's nostrils caught the faint perfume of Rosalind's hair as she halted in the doorway and whispered into the gloomy interior of her father's stockroom:

"Are you here, sir? This is Rosalind Keefer—"

Logan grinned, realizing his benefactor did not even know his name. He spoke softly, so as not to startle the girl with his nearness.

"I made it, thanks to you. I'd been a gone gosling without that key."

He fancied he heard a breath of relief leave the girl. Her groping hand met his.

"We'll talk in Dad's office. He daren't risk a light anywhere else in the store. Bolton and Overmile are still searching for you, sir. If you had left that gold at the Midgit, I think they would have called it quits."

Rosalind guided him out into the store, following her father down a narrow corridor between wall shelving and a counter piled high with goods. Logan's shoulder brushed a rack of shovels and picks, and their metallic jangle sounded like a clang of firebells in his overwrought imagination. He felt relief when Cyrus Keefer unlocked the door of the inner cubicle which was the Bonanza Mercantile office.

Flint and steel shot their dissolving spurt of sparks to dispel the blackness as Cyrus Keefer got a candle going. Its yellow glow revealed a black iron safe, a cluttered oaken desk, a rough deal filing cabinet bulging with invoices.

For the first time, Grat Logan felt ill at ease as he faced Keefer and the girl.

"You risked a lot, helping me this way," he said bleakly. "You heard me confess holding up that K & B stage. I haven't denied shooting Ben Knight."

So far Cyrus Keefer had said nothing, his gaunt face as inscrutable as a skull in the candle shine.

"You saved Daddy's life tonight," Rosalind said. "Not one man in a thousand would have come forward as you did—under the circumstances."

CYRUS KEEFER cleared his throat, as a prelude to breaking his unfathomable silence. "As Rozzie says, I owe you my life, young man. That is the one extenuating circumstance back of my permitting a—a confessed thief and murderer to use my store as a refuge. Tonight, as long as Bolton's wolf pack is on the prowl, I will let you remain here. But later—"

Logan read the trader's unfinished threat and smiled without malice.

"I came up from Wyoming," he said softly, "sworn to kill not only Ben Knight, but Ezra Bolton as well. I assure you I have my reasons."

Something in the pent-up hatred which entered Logan's voice put a cloud in Rosalind's eyes.

"You—you do not seem to be the type of man who is a killer," she said softly. "Bolton must have done you a great wrong, somewhere in the past."

Logan turned to the girl.

"Did you ever hear of Jerry Logan?" he asked abruptly. "He came to Alder Gulch shortly after the discovery in '62."

Rosalind and her father exchanged glances.

"We knew Jerry Logan," the girl answered. "He was the young cavalry officer, wasn't he, who abandoned his gold claim to drive a K & B stage between here and Salt Lake."

"Until he was bushwhacked by road agents," Keefer put in, "at almost the same spot where this man killed Ben Knight."

Grat Logan's mouth hardened behind his screening beard.

"Jerry Logan," he said, "was my kid brother. I was running cattle down in Bighorn Basin after he was mustered out and I got him to come West. The Alder Gulch gold rush called him away."

Grat gave his two listeners a moment to let that information sink in. Then he continued in a harsher tone.

"Jerry's very presence on that Bannack stage was a signal—a signal that Knight & Bolton were shipping a hundred pounds of bullion out of Alder City. The only people who knew of that shipment were Ben Knight and Ezra Bolton—and my brother."

Cyrus Keefer shook his head slowly from side to side, his mind groping with the monstrous implication which Logan had left unsaid.

"Knight and Bolton," Grat Logan ground out, "were members of Henry Plummer's secret gang of cutthroats, the Innocents. They escaped the dragnet your vigilante committee threw out, escaped because of their record of respectability. Knight and Bolton sent Jerry to his doom—as surely as if they had pulled the triggers that killed him."

Logan pulled in a deep breath to control his mounting heat.

"That is the score I came up from Wyoming to settle in powdersmoke. That was why I held up that stage—my opening move in a campaign to smash K & B Express. Now can you stand there and say I am not justified?"

KEEFER, at least, was unconvinced. Against his better judgment—impelled by a sudden paradoxical desire to redeem himself in the eyes of this girl whose kiss still lingered in his recent memory—Logan dug in a pocket of his levis and brought out a grimy envelope, dog-eared from repeated handlings.

"Jerry sent me this by a trapper, down in the Bighorns," Grat said, removing a letter from the envelope. "Along with this letter the trapper brought word of his death."

He handed the missive to Rosalind, who read aloud:

Bro Grat:

I been dealt cards in a game that's got too steep for me. I've found out that my bosses, Ben Knight and Ezra Bolton, are members of the Innocents gang that the vigilantes have been busting up this past winter. I found that out only because the remnants of the gang held a secret meeting in the K & B stable, not knowing I had come in late from a poker spree and was sleeping in an empty manger right alongside them.

Tomorrow, K & B is shipping better than $50,000 in bullion to Bannack City. The shipment i supposed to be a secret, although there ain't been a holdup since Henry Plummer was hanged last winter.

There are three stages going to Bannack from here tomorrow. The one the bullion will be on is marked, because I'm to be the driver of that particular Concord.

I'll have my chance to defend that bullion, maybe. Or maybe I'll be ambushed; That wasn't discussed. I can't go to the vigilantes with what I know, because Gig Overmile and his men are over in the Gallatin Valley rounding up some Innocents hiding over that way.

So it boils down to me having a 50-50 chance of getting my chips cashed in tomorrow, Grat. I won't play sick or drunk to save my hide. I'm thinking about the poor devils who own that bullion, the muckers who saved it ounce by ounce for years running. Barring an ambush, I figger to see that bullion get through to Bannack.

As ever your bro,
Gerald

Keefer's face was rutted with deep lines as his daughter finished reading. Grat Logan had put his cards on the

table. The next move was Keefer's, and he remained silent.

"You know what happened," Grat Logan said. "My brother, without even a shotgun guard to back his play, got himself 'bushed. He didn't have a chance. Even the passengers were massacred on that run. And Knight & Bolton have the gall to post a $5,000 reward for information leading to the recovery of that bullion—which is salted away to their credit in some bank in Portland or Frisco or Salt Lake, right this minute."

Logan found himself making no apparent headway against Keefer's impassive, brooding silence.

"Jerry was two months in his grave before word of his killing reached me down in the Bighorns, along with this letter," he said. "I came as soon as I heard. By accident, I squared his account with Ben Knight, over on the Beaverhead. Now Ezra Bolton—"

Rosalind Keefer broke in: "You must place this letter in Gideon Overmile's hands, Grat. Let the vigilantes handle this thing. You—you're too fine a man to become a hunted outlaw."

Logan laughed harshly. "No. Ezra Bolton is a vigilanteman. He'd laugh at this letter, defy me to prove Jerry even wrote it. Bolton could say that Jerry had a personal grudge against his bosses, something trivial like that. No, Rosalind. This account is payable in powdersmoke. I've tipped my hand to you I'll know who to hold responsible if the vigilantes hear of—"

Logan broke off as a loud knock sounded on the outer door of the trading post. Gid Overmile's voice resounded outside, demanding admittance.

Logan dropped a hand to gun butt, his eyes bleak and dangerous as he watched Keefer.

"Gideon knew we saw you come back into the tent and recover that gold," Keefer spoke unsteadily. "He probably saw Rozzie and me come into the Mercantile just now. He knows we don't bunk here. It's unusual, our coming here at three o'clock in the morning."

Logan left his gun in holster. Overmile's renewed pounding on the iron door was proof that he knew the Keefers were inside. It was in Keefer's power to betray him, force him to fight or run.

"Wait in the back room, Logan. I'll stall Overmile off." Keefer sounded sincere enough.

Keefer picked up the candle and headed outside. Rosalind threw a panicked glance behind her as Logan, crouched low behind the store counter, made his way to the warehouse door.

CHAPTER V

STANDING back in the shadows, Logan watched tensely as Cyrus Keefer unbolted the front door and let Gideon Overmile into the store. The vigilanteman's white beard was dirty and gnarled and he was carrying a double-barreled buckshot gun.

"I want to know the truth, Cy!" panted the head of the vigilantes. "Are you harboring that fugitive tonight? Why else would you and Rozzie be here at this ungodly hour of the the night?"

Keefer shut the door carefully behind Overmile.

"That's a serious charge, neighbor. Why would I—"

Overmile's gaze raked past the two Keefers to size up the shadow-clotted store.

"You were the last people to actually see the man close up," Overmile pointed out. "He saved your life. That would give you reasonable cause to feel you owed him shelter in return. Don't back into the wrong stall to shield a murderer, Cy."

Keefer and his daughter remained silent.

"Bolton and I have fine-toothed every house in camp," Overmile went on wearily. "No trace. He was last

seen in the alley alongside your warehouse. It adds up, Cyrus. I want the truth from you."

Keefer shook his head adamantly.

"Guesswork, Overmile. Rozzie and I were too nervous to sleep, after what happened. I thought we'd spend the rest of the night working on our books."

Overmile's attention was on Rosalind's eyes during this speech. He saw the quick panic there, shrewdly guessed its cause.

"You make a poor liar, Cyrus," Overmile said gently, without malice. "I must search your place. You—"

The jingle of a spur rowel brought Cy Keefer wheeling around, nearly extinguishing the candle. Stalking into the yellow glow from the black maw of the warehouse door came the towering figure of Grat Logan. His Colt .44 neutralized the threat of Overmile's scattergun.

"Hand that greener over to Rosalind," Logan ordered in a dead, wooden voice. "I'm giving myself up. But you'll listen to what I have to say first."

In the back room of the tarpaper-roofed shanty where Gideon Overmile made his bachelor quarters in Alder City, Grat Logan scrubbed a cake of lye soap over his beard-stubbled jaw. Steam from a basin of water eddied between him and the mottled mirror hanging from a nail in the log wall.

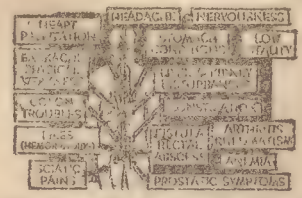
In that mirror, Logan had a view of the front room of Overmile's cabin. The vigilante chief sat at a split-pole table there, drinking coffee with Cyrus Keefer. Out of range of the looking glass, Rosalind was stoking Overmile's cookstove while she fried bacon and hominy cakes for breakfast.

Outside, the pink promise of dawn stained the Montana sky.

His lathering completed, Logan picked up the razor Overmile had lent him. He had already clipped down

Fistula May Often Result From Piles

FREE BOOK—Gives Facts On Associated Ailments



A new, illustrated 40-page book on Fistula, Rectal Abscess, Piles and other rectal and colon disorders is now FREE to all sufferers. Write today—a card will do. Thornton & Minor Clinic, Suite 1064, 926 McGee St., Kansas City, Mo.

$1,200.00 PRIZES for 10 Hit SONGWRITERS

Opportunity for publication and advance royalty. No charge for melodies. Records, lead sheets furnished. Send song material now. Write for details. CINEMA SONG CO. Dept. 39 Box 670, Beverly Hills, Calif.

OLD LEG TROUBLE

Easy to use Viscose Home Method. Heals many old leg sores caused by poor circulation, varicose veins, swollen legs and leg pain at little cost. Satisfaction or no cost. Send for FREE BOOK and details. Describe your trouble and get FREE BOOK.

M. P. VISCOSE COMPANY
3440 North Dearborn Street Chicago, Illinois

LEARN HOW TO HYPNOTIZE

Amazing self-study lessons . . . so simple, easy to understand language. How to select a subject—how to hypnotize by command—how to make subject free from hypnotism—mental telepathy—stage hypnotism—self-hypnosis—how to hypnotize a friend to perform ludicrously complex feats, ballet dancing, singing, etc. Clear full-page forms show exactly what to do. Many illustrations, instruments. Money-back guarantee. Only $1.98, postpaid — or COD, plus postage. Write today!

Nelson-Hall Co., 1139 S. Wabash Ave., Dept. C-13, Chicago 5, Ill.

BEAT ANY DICE GAME

Have Gold in Your Pocket When There's Silver in Your Hair

Send me a Stamped Self-Addressed Envelope and I will tell you things about DICE you never knew. Print Name and Address Plainly.

J. F. STEWART

Box 525 Houston, Texas

Free for Asthma

If you suffer with attacks of Asthma and choke and gasp for breath, if restful sleep is difficult because of the struggle to breathe, don't fail to send at once to the Frontier Asthma Company for a FREE trial of the FRONTIER ASTHMA MEDICINE, a preparation for temporary symptomatic relief of paroxysms of Bronchial Asthma. No matter where you live or whether you have faith in any medicine under the sun, send today for this free trial. It will cost you nothing.

FRONTIER ASTHMA CO. 975-B FRONTIER BLDG.
462 NIAGARA ST. BUFFALO 1, N. Y.

his curly red whiskers, a beard which had been six weeks in the growing. That beard had been a necessary disguise yesterday when he was not yet ready for Alder City to know his relationship to the martyred Jerry Logan. But now he was under technical arrest by the vigilantes; the beard had served its purpose, and now it was essential to his scheme that it come off.

The razor, keen as it was, seemed only to scrape at the wire-tough roots of his whiskers. When he had finished, Logan regarded his fatigue-lined face in the mirror and was satisfied with what he saw there.

CROSSING the room, he pulled a discreet curtain across the connecting doorway and proceeded to strip. Lying on Overmile's cot was a folded shirt, a double-breasted blue woolen garment popular with the miners, which Keefer had taken off a shelf at the trading post an hour ago. It replaced the faded hickory shirt and canvas vest which the vigilante jury had seen him wearing. The vest and the gold it contained now reposed in Keefer's iron safe.

In lieu of his work-soft bibless levis and spike-heeled Coffeyvilles, Logan pulled on a pair of Overmile's corduroy buckskin-foxed pants and wriggled his legs into a pair of warped, muddy boots with hobnailed soles, typical of the footgear worn by the majority of Alder Gulch miners.

The only item of his original garb remaining to put on was the gunbelt and holstered Dragoon, which was now in Overmile's custody out in the front room. Retaining that gun was Overmile's proof of his prisoner's good faith for the deal Overmile had made with Logan back in the Bonanza Mercantile this morning was, to say the least, highly irregular.

Running splayed fingers through his leonine mane of cinnamon-hued hair, Grat Logan stepped out through the curtained doorway to face Overmile and the Keefers. The trio greeted his altered appearance with unanimous astonishment.

"It's—it's as if Jerry's ghost were walking," ejaculated Gideon Overmile. "You're a dead ringer for him—as he would have looked five-six years from now."

Logan seated himself before the plate of hot food Rosalind had set for him.

"I'm thirty," he said laconically, his mind on other things. "Jerry was only nineteen. We were often mistaken for each other."

Overmile and Keefer watched in dour silence while Logan wolfed down what might be his last meal this side of eternity. Before he had finished, the sun rose in blazing splendor beyond the gulch rim, to reveal the unlovely panorama of the mining camp outside Overmile's cabin window.

"The Bannack stage is making ready in front of Knight & Bolton's," Overmile reported. "I know Ezra plans to be aboard this morning. We can't tarry longer."

Logan pushed back his chair, met the full strike of the vigilanteman's eyes as Overmile handed him his Dragoon and gunbelt. He checked the percussion caps automatically after buckling the harness around his midriff.

"You're sure you want to go through with this thing—if you'd rather put it before a jury—"

Overmile clapped his jaw shut on whatever he was about to propose, and stepped out into the bracing morning air, already carrying its hint of vinter snows soon to come.

Rosalind Keefer stood by the door as Logan prepared to join her father and Overmile outside. When he turned, it was to surprise a suspicion of moisture in her lovely eyes

"Luck, Grat. My prayers will be with you, every step. I know this is the right way to handle things. I'm proud of you for facing Overmile when you could easily have slipped

out the back door of the warehouse."

He grinned, the first time the harsh fixture of his lips had changed since she had seen him face Overmile's shotgun over in the Bonanza.

He said, "Thanks, Rosalind," when his whole spirit was aflame, goading him to take this girl in his arms and tell her that it was for her and her alone that he was making this gamble, with his own life staked on the outcome.

"I'll be here," Rosalind whispered as he tarried on the threshold, "when you've finished your business with Ez Bolton."

He was gone then, the butt of his Colt .44 swinging like a plow handle at his thigh. The two older men had to double their pace to match his purposeful stride down the main street.

Here at the crack of dawn, Alder city's muddy thoroughfare was almost deserted. The sun was a blood-red disk behind the black tracery of the hangtree's skeletal shape; the false fronts of the locked deadfalls and honkytonks of this sin-steeped town cut angular patterns against the dawn's glorious coloring.

IN FRONT of Knight & Bolton's a mud-spattered Concord was being readied for the run to Bannack. Hostlers hitched four big Morgans to the traces. Express hands were loading mail sacks in the boot. A whisky drummer was enjoying the last of his cigar before mounting the stage step.

Cutting in between Concord and porch, the porch where Cyrus Keefer had stood condemned in the eyes of the lynch-thirsty mob yesterday afternoon, the three men mounted the side steps and approached the open door of the Knight & Bolton waiting room. A miner sleeping off a drunk lay on a bench alongside the door as the shadows of the three men ran ahead of them along the scuffed planking.

Gideon Overmile had Jerry Logan's letter clutched in his fist as he turned

Stop Getting Up Nights

TRY THIS FREE

If you get up many times at night due to Irritation of Bladder or Urinary Tract, and have never used PALMO TABLETS we want you to try them at our risk. We will send you a full-size package from which you are to use 20 tablets FREE. If not delighted at the palliative relief received, return the package and you owe us nothing! We mean it. Send No Money. No C.O.D. to pay. Write today and we will send your PALMO TABLETS by return mail postpaid. For adults only. Address—

H. D. POWERS CO., Dept. 1016M, Box 135, Battle Creek, Mich.

Buy U. S. SECURITY BONDS

ILLUSTRATED COMIC BOOKLETS

Sell our ILLUSTRATED COMIC BOOKLETS and other NOVELTIES. Each booklet size 4½x2¾. We will send 25 assorted booklets prepaid upon receipt of $1.00 or 75 assorted booklets sent prepaid upon receipt of $2.00. Wholesale novelty price list sent with order only. No orders sent C. O. D. Send Cash or Money-order.

REPSAC Sales Co., 65 Fifth Ave., Dept. 410, New York 3, N. Y.

SONG WRITERS!

POEMS • LYRICS • COMPLETE SONGS WANTED FOR NEW MUSIC SALES CATALOGUE!

Publication Review with CASH ADVANCE Royalty on All Material accepted for IMMEDIATE PUBLICATION!

Offer Subject to Time Limit—Rush Your Poems—Lyrics—Songs Today to Dept. C

CAMDEN MUSIC COMPANY

ITCHY Checked in a JIFFY

Relieve itching caused by eczema, athlete's foot, scabies, pimples and other itching conditions. Use cooling, medicated D.D.D. Prescription. Greaseless, stainless. Soothes, comforts and checks itching fast. 35c trial bottle proves it—or money back. Don't suffer. Ask your druggist today for D.D.D. Prescription.

30 PERSONALIZED LESSONS PLUS BOOK OF 53 SONGS 1.69

Starts You Playing Songs At Once

It's easy to play the guitar! If you want to play song hits, hymns, waltzes, western songs, and old guitar favorites like "La Paloma," here's sensational news! One of the nation's foremost instructors has perfected a wonderfully quick and easy course that teaches guitar in your own home! Tells all you need to know about guitar playing, shows where to put your fingers, starts you playing simple songs like "Long, Long, Ago" the 2nd lesson. 30 lessons in all, so perfectly arranged, you'll be thrilled at your rapid progress. Write for this outstanding course today!

Gift Song Book Included

Act today, and receive, without extra cost, KARL & HARTY'S BIG 53 SONG BOOK regularly priced at $1.00 . . . words and music to 53 radio favorites like "I'm Here To Get My Baby Out Of Jail," "Friendless and Sad" and 51 other songs especially suitable for guitar. This wonderful book without extra cost *if you act TODAY!*

SEND NO MONEY

Let 3 Week Home Trial Convince You

Send name and address and receive complete, pictured guitar instructions for approval. On arrival pay postman only $1.69 plus postage and you must play guitar to your complete satisfaction in just 3 weeks or return for money back. Write to:

JIM MAJOR, Room 17M, 230 E. Ohio Street, Chicago 11, Ill.

SONGWRITERS

We are interested in all types of song poems and lyrics. Send us yours for FREE examination. If accepted Motion Picture Songwriter will collaborate with you. Established since 1935. Write to Paramount Song-Recording Studio, Dept. T-36, Box 190, Hollywood, Cal.

25 PHOTO STUDIES BY PROFESSIONAL MODELS

NOW IN Beautiful COLOR

$10 VALUE FOR ONLY $2.95

No artist should be without our famous "STRIP-O SLIDES" Life Art Studies of Thrilling Models in Graceful Poses. Only our genuine Strip-O-Slides come with complete, separate theme for every set. Series 1, 2, 3, and 4 now available on 35MM film strip, complete with ready mounts. Sent P.P. postage prepaid $2.95 per set Strip-O-Slides.

For faster 1st class mail enclose 10c to cover extra postage. Order Now!

Magnifying Viewer for Perfect Detail. Holds either Film Strip or Slides $1.50

(When ordered with above film)

For sample Strip-O-Slide Life Art Study in plastic mount, together with Illustrated Catalog, send us 25c with name and address.

BENEFIT CORP., Dept 38, 3807 Benefit St. Baltimore 24, Md.

into the waiting room, Keefer at his heels. By prearranged plan, Grat Logan halted on the porch beside the bulletin board. One of the dodgers displayed there bore K & B's standing offer for a $5,000 reward for the capture of the outlaw gang which had slain driver Gerald Logan and escaped with a consignment of gold bullion, months ago.

The stage jehu, wiping coffee from his whiskers, strode out of the express company office. He glanced at Logan and grunted out a noncommittal "Hi yuh, Jerry," and was climbing up the front wheel of the waiting stage before he realized what he had said and froze with his hands clutching the seat railing.

Logan stepped into the waiting room, saw the door of an office marked *Private* directly ahead of him. The door was ajar, giving him a glimpse of Ezra Bolton facing Keefer and Overmile. Bolton was wearing a plucked beaver overcoat in preparation for the cold journey to Bannack City. At the moment, his eyes were shuttling over the letter Overmile had handed him.

"This is hogwash, of course!" Bolton's big bass voice rumbled through the doorway. "Why, I helped organize the vigilantes, as you well know, Gid. For the express purpose of wiping out the Innocents. If Jerry Logan were alive we'd get to the bottom of this—this calumnious outrage soon enough."

Gideon Overmile's voice sounded deceptively soft in contrast to Bolton's thunderous outburst. "Can we be sure Logan died in that ambush, Ezra? Did you see him buried?"

Grat Logan toed open the door. Timed with his appearance, Overmile and Keefer separated, to give Bolton a full view of the tall, smooth-shaven giant in miner's garb.

"Howdy, boss."

Grat Logan saw Bolton's face bleach of color, leaving his strawberry cheek blemish standing out in

terrible relief, like a splash of blood leaking from a bullet hole.

Bolton sagged back against the desk, his spread arms pulling his beaver coat apart to expose the heavy guns strapped there for cross-draw. For a man who a moment before had been protesting his outraged innocence, Bolton behaved in singular fashion now.

"Jerry—but you can't be Jerry—"

Logan took another step forward. "Why not, Bolton? Did you make sure I was dead, that morning on the Beaverhead?"

Bolton's hands flashed up and outward with all the old gunhawk skill he had brought with him to Alder Gulch's gold rush. His twin Colts blurred out of leather, full-cocked.

With deadly precision, the man from Wyoming hooked the big Dragoon out of his holster and his thumb tripped the knurled hammer even as the .44 came level.

Blending with the ear-riving con-

RUPTURED?

Get Relief This Proven Way

Why try to worry along with trusses that gouge your flesh—press heavily on hips and spine—enlarge opening—fail to hold rupture? You need the Cluthe. No leg-straps or cutting belts. Automatic adjustable pad holds at real opening—follows every body movement with instant increased support in case of strain. Cannot slip whether at work or play. Light. Waterproof. Can be worn in bath. Send for amazing FREE book, "Advice To Ruptured," and details of liberal truthful 60-day trial offer. Also endorsements from grateful users in your neighborhood. Write

Cluthe Sons, Dept. 60, Bloomfield, New Jersey

PATENTS

Write for full information on what steps an inventor should take to secure a Patent.

PATRICK D. BEAVERS, 901 Columbian Bldg., Washington 1, D. C.

Game & Club Supplies

Permanent Beveled and Weighted Transparent Plastic Tops and Bottoms; Door Pops; Hit and Miss Combinations; Luminous Glasses and Readers; Shuffle Board; Bicycle and Bee Readers. Rush FREE Catalog request.

FREE Catalog

"The Old Reliable"

D. SMYTHE CO.,

BOX 4 NEWARK, 4, O.

SONG POEMS WANTED

All types of Poems wanted for musical setting. FREE Examination! Send your Poems in for immediate consideration.

HAWAIIA SONG SERVICE

613 Manhattan Building Milwaukee 3, Wisconsin

MALE HORMONE*

PRESCRIBED FOR

WANING VIGOR IN MEN

*METHYL TESTOSTERONE (R) is bringing new hope to thousands of men worrying because of waning power, nervousness, uncertainty and loss of initiative induced by fear. Recent magazine articles hailed Methyl Testosterone (male hormone) as a promise to older men in extending the prime of life. It was referred to as one of the necessary life-giving vital sparks that supply drive and energy, provided their doctors determined they are suffering from a deficiency of this male hormone substance.

As national distributors of Methyl Testosterone for oral use, we are cooperating with physicians everywhere in filling prescriptions. We are specialists in the marketing of Vitamins, Pharmaceuticals and Biologicals. WRITE TODAY.

Mail the Coupon for Free literature, case histories and prices of Male Hormone for personal use.

FREDERICK HERPSCHNER, Dept. 127-A, National Distributor, 411 So. Wells St., Chicago 7, Illinois.

Please Send Me Literature on Male Hormone Without Obligation.

NAME ...

ADDRESS ...

CITY ... STATE ...

PULVEX FLEA POWDER

TWO KINDS

WITH 5% DDT
... for dogs. Kills fleas and lice quick. Keeps fleas off 5-7 days. Many home uses.

OR WITH ROTENONE
... for cats, dogs. Quickly kills fleas, lice. Kills fleas when put on a single spot. Pre-war formula.

EITHER KIND: 25¢ & 50¢

Guaranteed by Good Housekeeping

High School Course at Home Many Finish in 2 Years

Go as rapidly as your time and abilities permit. Course equivalent to resident school work—prepares for college entrance exams. Standard H. S. texts supplied. Diploma. Credit for H. S. subjects already completed. Single subjects if desired. High school education is very important for advancement in business and industry and socially. Don't be handicapped all your life. Be a High School graduate. Start your training now. Free Bulletin on request. No obligation.

American School, Dept. H275, Drexel at 58th, Chicago 37

SONG POEMS WANTED TO BE SET TO MUSIC

Submit one or more of your best poems for free examination. Any subject. Send poem. PHONOGRAPH RECORDS MADE. FIVE STAR MUSIC MASTERS.
650 BEACON BLDG., BOSTON 8, MASS.

BE A DETECTIVE

Make Secret Investigations

Earn Big money. Work home or travel. Fascinating work. Experience Unnecessary. **DETECTIVE** Particulars FREE. Write to **GEO. T. A. WAGNER,** 125 W. 86th St. **N. Y.**

DO YOU WANT TO **STOP TOBACCO?**

Banish the craving for tobacco as thousands have with Tobacco Redeemer. Write for free booklet telling of injurious effect of tobacco and of a treatment which has relieved many men.

35 Years in Business
300,000 Satisfied Customers

FREE BOOK

THE NEWELL COMPANY
135 Clayton Sta., St. Louis 5, Mo.

BOOKLETS

The kind grown ups like. Each one of these booklets is POCKET SIZE, also contains 8 ILLUSTRATIONS, and is full of fun and entertainment. 12 of these joke booklets, ALL DIFFERENT, shipped prepaid upon receipt of $1.00, or 24 BOOKLETS ALL DIFFERENT shipped prepaid for $2, cash or money order. No orders sent C.O.D. Print name and address and mail to: TREASURE NOVELTY CO., Dept. 62-M, Box 28, Cooper Station, New York 3, N. Y.

DO YOU SUFFER *from* **RHEUMATISM?**
ARTHRITIS? NEURITIS? SCIATICA?

Send for **FREE BOOK**

describing the proven, specialized treatment that has been amazingly successful in combatting rheumatism, arthritis and similar painful disorders. This illustrated book "RHEUMATISM" fully explains causes and effects . . . tells you WHY drugs and medicines afford but temporary relief. Delay may be dangerous.

LEARN ABOUT SPECIALIZED TREATMENT

Send for FREE Book today—a postcard will do. No obligation. Write today.

BALL CLINIC Dept. 59, Excelsior Springs, Mo.

cussion of Logan's gun came the double blast of Ezra Bolton's upswinging Colts. Logan felt a bullet's impact smash the hard musculature of his thigh and drive him back against the doorjamb.

Sick with bullet shock, he held his feet long enough to drive a second shot into Bolton's chest. But Bolton was already a dead man, before his knees caved and his great body thumped the puncheon floor with a vibration that put a stab of sheer agony through Logan's leg.

A gutter of blood pooled out from under Bolton, smudging the crumpled letter which lay at Gideon Overmile's feet.

"Pray God," Overmile's voice came to Logan as if from a remote void, "Bolton's death marks the end of the Innocents, the last ringleader of the wild bunch . . ."

Grat Logan was vaguely aware of Cyrus Keefer's strong arms grabbing him as he swayed away from the doorjamb. The smell of burned powder eddied sickeningly about them as Logan thrust his Dragoon back in holster.

"Your gamble paid off," Keefer was saying. "And Rozzie'll make a tolerably fine nurse. You'll get to know us better in the four-five weeks it'll take to put you in shape to ride back to Wyoming, I hope."

Assisted out into the winter-tinged air of Alder City, supported by Keefer and Overmile, Grat Logan felt the weeks-long tension ease off in his big frame as he saw Rosalind Keefer running up the street toward him.

In that moment Grat Logan found himself looking forward to this enforced stay he faced in Alder City. Maybe, if he interpreted the look in Rosalind's face aright, he wouldn't be alone when he rode back to his spread in the Bighorn foothills this winter.

Mr. Micawber was only half-right!

MR. MICAWBER'S financial advice to young David Copperfield is justly famous.

Translated into United States currency, it runs something like this:

> *"Annual income, two thousand dollars; annual expenditure, nineteen hundred and ninety-nine dollars; result, happiness. Annual income, two thousand dollars; annual expenditure, two thousand and one dollars; result, misery."*

But Mr. Micawber was only half-right!

Simply *not* spending more than you make isn't enough. Every family must have a cushion of savings to fall back on... and to provide for their future security.

U. S. Savings Bonds offer one of the best ways imaginable to build savings.

Two convenient, automatic plans make the systematic purchase of Savings Bonds both sure and trouble-free:

1. If you work for wages or salary, join Payroll Savings—the *only* installment-buying plan.

2. If you're in business, or a farmer, or in a profession, and the Payroll Savings Plan is *not* available to you, then sign up at your bank for the Bond-A-Month Plan.

Each helps you build a nest egg of absolutely safe, 100% government-backed U. S. Savings Bonds. And these bonds make more money for you while you save. For after only ten years, they pay you back $400 for every $300 you put in them.

Join the Plan *you're* eligible for today! As Mr. Micawber would say: "Result, security!"

AUTOMATIC SAVING IS SURE SAVING - U.S. SAVINGS BONDS

Contributed by this magazine in co-operation with the Magazine Publishers of America as a public service.

U.S. SECURITY LOAN

...Your Car for ONLY $3.95

2 FULL COATS — ONE QUART DOES ENTIRE JOB

WYPE

TRADE MARK REG.

NO SPRAYING · NO MASKING · NO BRUSHING

AMAZING NEW BRUSHLESS AUTO ENAMEL

You JUST WIPE ON with a POWDER PUFF instead of Brushing or Spraying

Dries Dust Free One Hour · No Streaks or Lapmarks

Get Beautiful Mirror Like Finish That Looks Like Spray Job!

At last! Practically anyone can now paint his car with WYPE! No previous car-painting experience necessary. You get a beautiful high-gloss job that gives you an expensive finish such as is sprayed on by Professional Auto Painters—at a fraction of regular cost! With WYPE you need **NO** BRUSH, **NO** SPRAY, **NO** MASKING! Just **WIPE ON** with Powder Puff—which we furnish at no extra charge. You get a brilliant, glossy finish, that is truly "factory-like." No streaks. No lap-marks. Guaranteed for TWO years not to crack, peel, chip or fade, if simple directions are followed. Takes about an hour to apply. Dries dust-free in an hour. WYPE comes in nine most popular shades including those on newest model cars. Goes over any other color, lacquer or enamel.

MOST POPULAR COLORS

Black — Brewster (dark) Green
Maroon — Jewel (light) Green
Red — Washington (dark) Blue
...ay — Monticello (light) Blue
Sun Beige (light Tan)

$3.95 Per Quart

OVER 200,000 CARS PAINTED WITH WYPE

and thousands more being painted every week. The final test of customer satisfaction — thousands of our new customers are being sent to us by old customers!

SEE YOUR DEALER or ORDER DIRECT SEND NO MONEY · Get WYPE Today!

If your dealer can't supply you, just send us a postcard. We'll ship C.O.D. Just pay mailman for Wype, plus postal charges. Or send remittance with order and WE pay postage.

You're SURE You Are SAFE when You Paint with WYPE HERE'S WHY!

TESTED BY U. S. Testing Co., Inc.

Leading Scientific Testing Laboratory

Report No. 87496
Jan. 5, 1948

and found to conform to the claims and guarantee of the Wype Corporation.

No higher or more rigid standards are set by any Testing Laboratory. United States Testing Company conducts scientific tests for the world's foremost organizations and is accepted as a leading authority on such tests.

For Your Protection

Before you buy any automobile paint, ask for proof that it has passed tests by a nationally known testing laboratory. Remember the value of your car! You can TRUST Wype.

2-YEAR GUARANTEE

We Guarantee WYPE against cracking, peeling, fading or chipping for two years after application, if applied according to directions furnished. Your money cheerfully refunded if WYPE does not live up to this Guarantee.

COPYRIGHT 1948, WYPE CORP., ST. LOUIS, MO.

APPLY in ONE HOUR— DRIES to GLISTENING PROFESSIONAL FINISH

WYPE is a new Miracle Enamel for Autos. It is NOT a wax or polish but a hard high lustre ENAMEL finish! With WYPE, ANYONE can do a beautiful job! Order a quart to paint your car or to get started in this BIG-MONEY Business!

NO STREAKS or LAPMARKS LOOKS LIKE SPRAY JOB

WANTED WYPE DEALERS

WYPE 2 Cars Daily at $25 Each—Gross Up to $260 Weekly

Start making BIG MONEY now! Sell WYPE in cans or go into business painting cars yourself (or hire others). Send for FREE details of powerful money-making plan. Why wait? Start now by ordering one quart or more of WYPE today!

CAR'S VALUE INCREASED

My car had been "crying" for a paint job for over a year. I decided on Wype. I was surprised at the ease, swiftness that Wype could be applied. In less than half a day my car was transformed from an "old" one to a "new" appearing one and was ready for use again. My friends were astounded. I have been offered considerably more money since I have the new paint job.—**Harold E. Sanders**, Lynbrook, Long Island.

Sold by America's Finest Department Stores and Leading Merchants Everywhere— DEALERS and JOBBERS — Write For Details

WYPE CORP. Dept. 76-K 2214 DOLMAN ST. ST. LOUIS 4, MO.

SCAN COURTSEY OF
EXCITER